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FEMALE COMBATANTS AND THE PERPETRATION OF VIOLENCE

Wartime Rape in the Sierra Leone Civil War

By DARA KAY COHEN*

MUCH of the current scholarship on violence in conflict settings assumes that women are victims and men are perpetrators. Even in studies of female fighters, the tendency is to take for granted that women do not participate in acts of violence, whether by choice or because women are assumed to play merely supporting roles to their male combatant counterparts. As one scholar notes, women in armed groups may more often be referred to as camp followers or dependents, whereas men are viewed as fighters, combatants, or soldiers.¹ What roles do female combatants serve in armed groups? In particular, to what extent do female combatants participate in perpetrating violence against noncombatants? Does the presence of women fighters prevent men from abusing noncombatants, as is often argued in policy circles? Or do women, when given the opportunity and facing similar social constraints and pressures, tend to perpetrate violence alongside their male peers?

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¹ MacKenzie 2009.

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Despite entrenched views that women are inherently nonviolent, there is an increasing awareness that women in armed groups may function as more than just cooks, cleaners, and sexual slaves. Some scholars have shown that women may be active fighters who, for example, are issued guns and who perpetrate violence with men. In this analysis, I focus on the involvement of female fighters in a form of violence in which the male perpetrator/female victim dichotomy is especially strong: the wartime rape of noncombatants. While there have been recent advances in raising awareness of the existence of male victims of wartime rape,² the conventional wisdom is that perpetrators of sexual violence are entirely male.³ In this sense, sexual violence is a hard case for understanding women's involvement as fighters in armed groups: if women are participating in the wartime rape of noncombatants, both academics and policymakers may need to revise widely accepted explanations and solutions.

In this article, I maintain that under certain conditions, women may become perpetrators of wartime rape. I employ a broad definition of "perpetrator." As discussed below, while some women committed the actual rape of victims (that is, by inserting objects into victims' bodies), other women were involved in gang rape by holding down the victim. In line with other studies of gang rape, I consider all of these participants to be perpetrators of rape.⁴ I present detailed evidence from the Sierra Leone civil war, including original interviews with ex-combatants and newly available survey data, which show that female combatants perpetrated rape alongside their male counterparts. Indeed, population-based survey data show that groups that included women perpetrated nearly one in four incidents of the reported gang rape in Sierra Leone.

A growing body of research from recent conflicts suggests that the phenomenon is not limited to Sierra Leone. Evidence from other cases indicates that women were implicated in the commission of

² Carpenter 2006.

³ One important exception is Sjöberg forthcoming. While I examine both male and female perpetrators of rape, I focus only on female victims of rape. In the Sierra Leone survey data used in this article (ABA/Benetech Sierra Leone War Crimes Documentation Survey (SLWCD)), there was exactly one report of a male rape victim. This should not be interpreted as evidence that men were rarely raped but should be taken to mean only that men rarely reported rape. Additionally, in interviews, the issue of male rape victims was seldom broached. Thus there are precious little data on the topic in the context of Sierra Leone—or, indeed, in many other contexts. The research on male victims of wartime rape is still nascent; for detailed analyses of the issue, see Sivakumaran 2007; and Stemple 2008.

⁴ Groth and Birbaum 1979. However, it should be noted that as a legal matter, restraining a victim may not constitute responsibility for an act of rape. Thanks to Fionnuala Ni Aolain for this clarification.

acts of brutal, including sexual, violence.⁵ A population-based survey conducted in 2010 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) found that 41 percent of female sexual violence victims reported that they were victimized by female perpetrators, as did 10 percent of male sexual violence victims.⁶ In Liberia, female fighters were implicated in the rape of women, including rape with objects such as guns, and in sexual crimes against men, such as cutting off their genitals.⁷ Women in armed criminal gangs, paramilitary, and self-defense groups in Haiti are reported to have committed sexual violence, including gang rape, against other women and members of enemy gangs.⁸ During the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, women were active perpetrators of both killing and sexual violence.⁹ A report from a nongovernmental organization cites examples of women involved in rape, including encouraging and ordering rape and turning over victims to be raped and killed.¹⁰ Finally, the prisoner abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib, in which photographs of Iraqi prisoners being sexually abused and humiliated by U.S. soldiers were broadcast by American media outlets, revealed women sexually abusing men during wartime, albeit short of rape.¹¹ In an interview, one of the women involved in the scandal described the role of women in encouraging and participating in the violence.¹² The three female perpetrators featured in the photographs were among the most frequently highlighted parts of the prisoner abuse scandal, and the fact that the victims of the sexual violence were male served further to confound common expectations of victim-perpetrator relationships.¹³ Collectively, these cases indicate that the involvement of women in wartime sexual violence in Sierra Leone is not an anomaly. However, while there is increasing evidence of the involvement of women in these violations, there are currently few explanations for why.

⁵ Vikman 2005, 42, notes that “female soldiers appear equally capable of degrading victims through sexual violence” and cites both Rwanda and Abu Ghraib as instances in which women participated in wartime sexual violence. Sjöberg and Gentry 2007 focus on female perpetrators of political violence; their case studies include Abu Ghraib, Chechnya, Yugoslavia, Sudan, and Rwanda.

⁶ Johnson et al. 2010.

⁷ Specht 2006; Advocates for Human Rights 2009.

⁸ Faedi 2010.

⁹ Jones 2002; Sharlach 1999; Wood 2009.

¹⁰ African Rights 1995; Landesman 2002. Sharlach 1999 argues that these reports from Rwanda raise serious doubts about existing theories on women and violence. However, subsequent scholarship has tended to assume that Rwandan women are unprecedented in their participation in violence; see, for example, Jones 2002.

¹¹ See McKelvey 2007 for a collection of essays on feminist responses to the Abu Ghraib scandal.

¹² Gourevitch and Morris 2008.

¹³ Bourke 2007; McKelvey 2007.

While recent research on female combatants has found that women may sometimes be active fighters during conflict,¹⁴ the involvement of women in wartime rape has received far less attention. That female perpetration of wartime sexual violence has remained somewhat hidden may be due, at least in part, to the fact that researchers have simply not asked about the sex of perpetrators, with rare exceptions. Besides the aforementioned 2010 survey in the DRC, there are at least four well-known population-based surveys that have measured sexual violence in conflict settings, including Liberia, Timor-Leste, Sierra Leone, and Uganda.¹⁵ With the sole exception of the DRC survey, in none of these studies did the survey instrument inquire as to the sex of the perpetrator.¹⁶ The survey data used in this analysis are among the first to question victims about the sex of their attackers. While the global extent of the phenomenon therefore remains unknown, the evidence suggests that the participation of female combatants in sexual violence may be more common than currently believed.

What explains female participation in wartime rape? I argue that female perpetrators of wartime rape are best explained by many—though not all—of the same reasons men become perpetrators.¹⁷ Women fighters face similar social pressures within armed groups that men do and, given a similar set of circumstances, are likely to commit similar forms of violence. That women perpetrate wartime atrocities is surprising only because of the gendered assumptions that scholars and policymakers often make about women's capacity to commit violence. One of the main puzzles of wartime rape is why, by many accounts and across a wide variety of contexts, gang rape occurs with more frequency during conflict than during peacetime.¹⁸ If this is indeed the case, then a robust explanation for wartime rape must account not only for the increased frequency during wartime as compared with peacetime but also for the form that the violence takes. To explain this puzzle, I look to the intragroup social dynamics of armed group units. Armed groups with low levels of internal cohesion—in particular, groups that rely on abduction to recruit fighters—turn to group violence to help create a

¹⁴ E.g., MacKenzie 2009.

¹⁵ United Nations General Assembly 2006. Note that the Sierra Leone survey mentioned in the UN report is not the same survey used in this analysis.

¹⁶ Although the original survey instruments themselves were not available, the published articles based on the surveys were reviewed for what information was collected about perpetrators. None of the articles report data based on questions about the sex of the perpetrators, which was apparently assumed to be male in all cases.

¹⁷ For related arguments about the similarities in men's and women's participation in suicide terrorism, see, for example, O'Rourke 2009; and Bloom 2011.

¹⁸ E.g., Mezey 1994; Theidon 2007.

coherent armed unit. Gang rape, an especially costly and public form of violence, is one method for creating bonds between fighters. The argument implies that in cases of abduction where there are more women fighters, more women will participate in wartime rape. Likewise, if there are very few women fighters, then there should be very few cases of female perpetrators.

Understanding the role of women in combatant groups has theoretical implications for several arguments concerned with gender, war, victimization, and violence. First, the evidence presented here points to a blind spot in the current research on war violence, the central actors of which are armed groups. Without correctly identifying the individuals who constitute the armed groups and, more specifically, without accounting for the large numbers of female combatants in some groups, it is impossible to understand motivations for extreme violence in armed conflict. Second, many of the common explanations for wartime rape are dependent upon the assumption that combatants are male. Very little of the previous scholarship has acknowledged the role that women may have in perpetrating rape against noncombatants.¹⁹ The argument also has implications for the literature on cohesion in military units and the effect women may have on unit cohesion. While previous literature has emphasized the ease with which social cohesion forms,²⁰ I argue that among fighters who have been abducted by their peers, who may fear each other and have no basis for trusting one another, cohesion is unlikely to develop spontaneously. Finally, the study has implications for arguments that are centered on the ways that gender and patriarchy affect violence. The findings presented here concur with studies about the bonding role of male aggression in groups;²¹ however, the evidence also suggests that many men and women are likely to succumb to and participate in—rather than rebel against—male-led violent behavior. To be clear, the argument is not that women (or men) are natural perpetrators of violence, but rather that under certain conditions

¹⁹ Exceptions include Sharlach 1999; Jones 2002; Alison 2007; Wood 2009; MacKenzie 2009; and case-specific studies of selected conflicts, such as Rwanda (for example, African Rights 1995). However, only the first two articles, which both focus exclusively on Rwanda, provide analyses beyond briefly mentioning the existence of female perpetrators.

²⁰ Kier 1998. Kier argues that previous research has not identified a causal link between social cohesion and military effectiveness. I make no argument about the connection between gang rape and military (often defined as battlefield) effectiveness; I maintain only that gang rape increases social cohesion among fighters, which in turn has an effect on the ability of the armed unit to organize the structure of the group, and to function in only the most basic of senses. In this way, gang rape may serve a purpose similar to the role that basic training plays in organized militaries, namely, to “eliminate individuality” (Kier 1998, 22).

²¹ Hudson et al. 2009.

combatants of both sexes may face enormous social pressure to commit violence and that both sexes are likely to respond to such pressures in similar ways.²²

The incomplete view of the identity of combatants and their perpetration of violence has undeniably bled over into the policy world, where women are frequently excluded both from the benefits of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs and from accountability for perpetrating violence in postconflict justice processes. By analyzing the role of women in wartime rape, this study joins a growing chorus of critiques both of the academic scholarship and of the programming of governmental and nongovernmental organizations related to sexual violations during war.²³

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. In Section I, I summarize three arguments drawn from the literature, each of which has implications for female combatants and their predicted effects on rape committed against noncombatants. Drawing from previous research in economics, sociology, and criminology, I then present an alternative argument about internal group dynamics that I call *combatant socialization*. In Section II, I briefly describe the armed groups in Sierra Leone and outline the data and research methodology used in the subsequent analysis. In Section III, I examine the evidence to determine the support for each of the arguments. I ultimately argue that combatant socialization best accounts for the observed patterns of violence by female perpetrators. In Section IV, I conclude and provide suggestions for future avenues of research and for policymakers.

I. WARTIME RAPE AND FEMALE COMBATANTS

A common contention in the literature is that the presence of women in a combatant unit will be negatively correlated with the tendency to abuse noncombatant women.²⁴ Wood, acknowledging that the exact mechanism remains unclear, repeatedly notes the apparent relationship between the large number of female insurgents in Sri Lanka and El Salvador and the relatively low levels of sexual violence perpetrated

²² This argument thus serves both to challenge and to uphold conventional wisdom. As discussed later, female fighters were rarely reported to perpetrate any form of violence alone or in groups of only women. The gendered patterns in the perpetration of violence suggest that masculinity may be an important factor regarding the types of violence that are selected (for example, rape) and who commits it (mostly men and some women). It is most accurate to describe violence, including gang rape, as male-led, with both female and male followers.

²³ Carpenter 2003; Carpenter 2006; MacKenzie 2009; Annan et al. 2011.

²⁴ Card 1996; Wood 2008; Wood 2009; MacKinnon 2006.

by these groups. Here, I outline a set of four distinct arguments linking female combatants and the rape of noncombatants, including three drawn from the previous literature and one original argument. Each of the four arguments yields observable implications about the effect of female fighters on rape against noncombatants.

TRADITIONAL PERSPECTIVE

The traditional perspective—a set of arguments that features common themes and assumptions about gender roles and violence—reflects the widely held belief that women are more nurturing and less bellicose than men, either by their nature or through socialization.²⁵ In conflict settings, women are usually not perceived to be combatants or even to be actively involved in the violence of war.²⁶ Women are more typically conceived of as victims of war, regardless of their relative risk of death or injury as compared with men.²⁷ Indeed, as one scholar argues, the need to specify the phrase “female combatant” itself implies that the conventional understanding is of a male-only fighting force.²⁸ While rooted in age-old ideas about femininity, the notion that women are inherently more peaceful than men and, furthermore, that women may pacify male violence continues to inform current policy debates. Historian Gerard DeGroot, an advocate for the inclusion of more women in peacekeeping operations, argues that women in armed groups appear to have a “civilizing effect”²⁹ on men by preventing undesirable male behavior, including the rape of noncombatants. In a 2010 keynote address to UN officials, DeGroot said: “Women can improve the effectiveness of peacekeeping operations for the simple reason that they are not men. Women, it seems, are less inclined toward violence.”³⁰ While not stated explicitly in DeGroot’s remarks, the central mechanism is that women essentially shame men into behaving more appropriately. The traditional perspective implies that groups with female fighters should be very unlikely to commit rape. The argument yields two observable implications. First, perpetrators of sexual violence should be almost entirely male, regardless of the proportion of women in the

²⁵ Bourke 1999; Sharlach 1999; Alison 2004. See van Creveld 2000, 441, as an example of what I term the traditional perspective; he argues that in recent civil wars, women are not active fighters but rather are either victims or supporters of men’s violence: “Young or old, in or out of uniform, women’s involvement in these conflicts is overwhelmingly as eggheads-on, camp followers, and victims.”

²⁶ Carpenter 2003 argues that men are often viewed as “presumptive combatants,” while women are seen as “presumptive noncombatants.”

²⁷ Carpenter 2003.

²⁸ Alison 2004.

²⁹ Carvajal 2010.

³⁰ DeGroot 2008.

group, and, second, there should be substantial evidence that male fighters feel shame committing rape in front of female counterparts.

SUBSTITUTION ARGUMENT

The substitution argument suggests that the presence of women in armed groups diminishes the “need” for the rape of noncombatants.³¹ The argument is founded on the basic assumption that male combatants require sexual gratification through intercourse with women and that this desire overrides all other factors that might serve to prevent rape. According to this perspective, female fighters can serve as substitutes for the rape of noncombatants in one of two ways. First, female combatants may be raped by or forced to marry male combatants. Or second, the fighters may be allowed to form consensual intimate relationships with each other. Scholars have suggested that one reason behind the institution of forced marriage in the Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda was that forcing male combatants into intimate partnerships with abducted women obviated the rape of noncombatants.³² The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka is another such example. Wood explains that after an initial period of prohibiting marriage, the LTTE allowed consensual marriage within the group and strictly prohibited all other sexual relations, including those with noncombatants.³³ Although Wood argues that these rules are reflective of norms within the organization, it is reasonable to question how and why these norms begin. One plausible origin of such norms is that access to sexual relations within the group decreases the likelihood of rape outside the group. A final example is the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in Colombia. Gutiérrez theorizes that having a substantial number of women in the FARC may have prevented that group from committing acts of sexual violence against civilians.³⁴ He notes that while sexual violence has been common against female members of the FARC, the group has generally refrained from acts of sexual violence against noncombatants, despite its otherwise violent history.

The argument yields a set of observable implications. First, as with the traditional perspective, the substitution argument suggests that groups with more female fighters should be less likely to commit rape of noncombatants. Second, perpetrators should be almost all male, regardless of the number of women in the group. Finally, there should be numerous reports of rape of female combatants, forced or consen-

³¹ This section draws from a description of the substitution argument in Wood 2009.

³² Annan et al. 2011.

³³ Wood 2009.

³⁴ Gutiérrez 2008.

sual marriage, or frequent sexual relations between combatants, as well as relatively fewer reports of rape against civilians.

SELECTION ARGUMENT

A third argument suggests that belligerent types of people choose to join combatant groups in order to commit violence. Mueller argues that the violence during the wars in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda was caused by a small number of criminals. These bands of people, described as “criminal and hooligan opportunists” and “common, opportunistic, sadistic . . . marauders,”³⁵ Mueller argues, were loosely organized by political elites to use coercive violence for political ends. The combatants who behave violently are thus understood to be rough types who enjoy violence, and war provides an excellent excuse to commit it without the constraints of peacetime. Weinstein makes a related argument: insurgent groups with access to material resources attract more violence-prone recruits than do groups that rely on ideology alone to recruit fighters. Weinstein argues that these initial conditions predict the types of recruits that are attracted to join a group and in turn determine whether civilian abuses will be committed on a mass scale.

Both Weinstein and Mueller maintain that armed groups may attract violent types, whether unwittingly through the offer of material inducements or actively by encouraging especially violent people to commit more violence. Research on group sexual violence in other contexts lends credence to the selection argument. In studies of college campus violence, scholars have suggested a selection mechanism for why members of fraternities and sports teams seem more likely than those in other types of campus organizations to engage in gang rape; they argue that sexually aggressive people are more likely to join fraternities or sports teams.³⁶ Groups that commit rape, then, should attract the types of people, whether male or female, who seek to perpetrate acts of sexual violence. Observable implications include, first, evidence of both female and male volunteers to armed groups and, second, reports of both female and male perpetrators of sexual violence.

COMBATANT SOCIALIZATION

A final argument is based on the idea that wartime violence—and especially rape—results from internal group processes.³⁷ Combatant groups

³⁵ Mueller 2000, 42–43.

³⁶ O’Sullivan 1991.

³⁷ I present a version of this argument—tested on a cross-national sample with a brief case study of Sierra Leone—in Cohen forthcoming.

that recruit new members through press-ganging or abduction face a central dilemma; namely, such groups must create a coherent fighting force out of a collection of strangers, many of whom were abused in order to compel them to join. Drawing from findings in economics, sociology, and criminology, I argue that rape, and especially gang rape, enables armed groups with forcibly recruited fighters to create bonds of loyalty and friendship from difficult initial circumstances of fear and mistrust. Researchers have established that violence can serve an important function in organizing the structure of groups with continual influxes of new members, and they have shown that performing acts of brutal violence can be an important part of the process of integrating new membership and maintaining social order among existing members.³⁸ Violence is also believed to be useful for cutting ties to a combatant's previous life, making it more difficult for an individual fighter to desert, as well as creating a sense of loyalty to the group and a collective responsibility for violent acts.³⁹

Others have also noted the role that gang rape can play in bonding together males in military units.⁴⁰ These scholars typically trace the source of sexual violence perpetrated by armed factions to group norms—a militarized sense of masculinity imparted to combatants through the training process. Wood counters that military training is not sufficiently different across groups to account for the variation in which armed groups rape and which do not.⁴¹ I also argue that rape and socialization within the military unit are inextricably linked, although for a different reason: I maintain that rape is a result of the practical needs of combatant groups faced with the challenge of forming a coherent fighting force of veritable strangers.

In one of the few studies of “nonconventional methods for promoting unit cohesion,” anthropologist Donna Winslow examines the practices of the Canadian Airborne Regiment (CAR).⁴² She argues that the need for unit cohesion is especially strong in the CAR because the members must rely on each other for jumping out of airplanes. Winslow documents how the CAR engaged in a variety of degrading and sometimes sexualized rituals whose ultimate purpose was the creation of bonds of loyalty and friendship within the group; she cites research that has

³⁸ Kaminski 2003; Humphreys and Weinstein 2008.

³⁹ The literature on child soldiering frequently mentions similar reasons for forcing child combatants to commit acts of violence in their home communities.

⁴⁰ Card 1996; Goldstein 2001. See also Coulter 2009 for a discussion of how rape may have been used as an initiation rite by rebel groups in Sierra Leone.

⁴¹ Wood 2006.

⁴² Winslow 1999.

found that the more extreme these rituals, the stronger the bond to the unit. Bonding within armed groups, she concludes, can take the form of inappropriate or harmful practices. Similarly, the “need” for bonding may be greater in groups that have abducted their fighters; individuals in these groups must almost immediately begin to rely on each other for basic survival despite having little foundation on which to base this trust. Along a continuum of violence, gang rape is one type of violence that may be used to create these bonds.⁴³

Research on group rape in peacetime has repeatedly shown that it increases esteem among perpetrators,⁴⁴ and it can serve the same role in increasing cohesion between fighters in armed groups. Notably, the social processes found to be important in gang rape are in stark contrast to rape committed by a lone offender. Gang rapists are believed to be more normal and less pathological than are single rapists;⁴⁵ the difference is attributed to the fact that pressures from a group can cause individuals to behave in ways that they would never do on their own.⁴⁶

The argument is not that individual combatants consciously desire to be more cohesive with the group that has forcibly kidnapped him or her but rather that exit from the armed group is often not a viable option—and that participation in group violence is preferable to continued estrangement from one’s peers. The existence and maintenance of social cohesion is of great importance for the ability of combatant groups to survive as groups—in order to avoid internal discord that may result in desertion, fractionalization, or uprisings—and rape is a powerful means of creating cohesion. In this way, social cohesion created through gang rape is functional for armed groups in war, although not in the sense of increasing “military effectiveness,” the manner in which social cohesion has typically been studied.⁴⁷

The argument predicts that forcibly recruited combatants will be more likely than voluntary fighters to engage in rape—in gang rape, in particular—against civilians. As with the selection argument, the observable implications include both male and female perpetrators of rape. The argument also implies that the most common form of rape should be gang rape. The observable implications of all four arguments are summarized in Table 1.

⁴³ An alternative view is that gender violence is worse than other forms of nonlethal violence; see, for example, Sharlach 2000 on rape as a form of genocide.

⁴⁴ Scully 1990; O’Sullivan 1991; Franklin 2004.

⁴⁵ Bijleveld and Hendriks 2003; Brownmiller 1975.

⁴⁶ Groth and Birnbaum 1979; Porter and Alison 2006; Franklin 2004.

⁴⁷ Again, I make no claims about the influence of gang rape on military effectiveness and would argue there is little correlation between the social cohesion created through acts of gang rape and the

TABLE 1
FEMALE COMBATANTS AND WARTIME RAPE AGAINST NONCOMBATANTS:
THEORETICAL PREDICTIONS

<i>Argument</i>	<i>Mechanism</i>	<i>What Effect Do Women Fighters Have on the Rape on Noncombatants?</i>	<i>Observable Implications</i>	
			<i>Perpetrators</i>	<i>Other</i>
Traditional	women fighters disrupt male bonding	—	mostly male	evidence of shaming of men by women
Substitution	women fighters serve as sexual partners/rape substitutes	—	mostly male	rape of, or partnerships with, female combatants
Selection	fighters, both women and men, seek groups to com- mit violence	+	male and female	male and female volunteers
Combatant Socialization	forcibly recruited combatants of either sex more likely to gang rape	neutral	male and female	gang rape is common form of rape

II. DATA, METHODS, AND BACKGROUND

SOURCES OF DATA

I draw on three main sources of data in the following analysis. First, I conducted thirty-four in-depth interviews with ex-combatants, twelve women and twenty-two men, in Sierra Leone between 2006 and 2008, including male and female representatives from all of the major fighting factions. These interviews of perpetrators are significant because they are among the first of their kind; most previous research has focused on the victims of sexual violence.⁴⁸ All of the interviews were

ability of armed groups to be successful fighters. Available data do not suggest that there is a correlation; by one estimate, the RUF in Sierra Leone, which reportedly committed the vast majority of the reported rape, lost almost two-thirds of the battles they fought over the course of the war; see Bellows and Miguel 2009.

⁴⁸ For example, Coulter 2009, 133, notes that most of what is known about rape in Sierra Leone focuses on victims, and, more broadly, there is a need for more research on perpetrators. Baaz and Stern's research based on interviews with perpetrators in the DRC (e.g., 2009) is an important exception.

conducted on the condition of anonymity, and all but one were one-on-one. Most of the interviews were conducted with a translator in Krio in Freetown, Sierra Leone, at the offices of PRIDE-SL, a local NGO that advocates for the rights of former fighters. The NGO arranged interviews for me, drawing on its extensive network of ex-combatants. I also recruited interviewees through informal networks of taxi drivers, many of whom are ex-combatants. Each interview typically lasted about two hours.⁴⁹

Every effort was made to draw interviewees from each of the major fighting factions, and interviewees included male and female combatants, former child fighters and adult combatants, rank-and-file fighters and commanders. Nevertheless, it should be noted that this analysis suffers from biases that plague any study based on a small-N, nonrandomly selected sample. The interviews should be understood not as representative but rather as illustrative examples of the patterns described in the survey data. While it may be argued that ex-combatants are unlikely to be truthful about their involvement in wartime atrocities, the interviewees were forthcoming about their personal experiences, as well as the experiences of their faction as a group.⁵⁰

Beyond interviews, I use two additional sources of population-based data. For information on patterns of wartime rape, including details on the perpetrators, I rely on a newly available data set from the ABA/Benetech Sierra Leone War Crimes Documentation Survey (SLWCD), a nationally representative survey of randomly selected households.⁵¹ For data on the demographics of the combatant groups, including information on recruitment patterns and the sex of combatants, I use data from a nationally representative survey of ex-combatants conducted by Humphreys and Weinstein.⁵²

Before reviewing the evidence for each of the competing arguments, I provide a brief overview of the basic patterns of violence and armed group demographics. A broader discussion of the causes of wartime rape in Sierra Leone is beyond the scope of this article; I focus here

⁴⁹ For additional details on the interview process, see Cohen 2010.

⁵⁰ Perhaps most importantly, ex-combatants would seem to have an incentive to claim they were ordered to rape, thereby passing responsibility to their superiors—not, as is the case, that they committed rape in the absence of orders. See the section on competing mechanisms for more detail on this point.

⁵¹ Asher and Human Rights Data Analysis Group 2004.

⁵² Humphreys and Weinstein 2004.

exclusively on which arguments account for the participation of female combatants in gang rape.⁵³

The eleven-year-long civil conflict in Sierra Leone is perhaps most noted for its brutal forms of violence against noncombatants—including amputation, cannibalism, and torture—and for the prevalence of child combatants. It is estimated that more than eighty thousand people—or about 2 percent of the total population of Sierra Leone—served as combatants in one or more of the factions over the course of the war.⁵⁴

FEMALE FIGHTERS IN THE SIERRA LEONE CIVIL WAR (1991–2002)

Among the major armed groups—the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), the Civilian Defense Forces (CDF), and the Sierra Leone Army (SLA)—there was significant variation in the groups in which men and women took part. Based on the ex-combatant survey, female combatants were overwhelmingly part of the RUF, which was 24 percent female, while making up a small minority of the SLA and the CDF, at 9 percent and 2 percent, respectively. Overall, about 5,200 women registered in the official disarmament and demobilization program, although this underrepresents the true number of women fighters.⁵⁵ Patterns of recruitment over time for both sexes were similar, with a gradual growth in the size of combatant groups as the war wore on.

PATTERNS OF RAPE IN SIERRA LEONE

Rape was reported to have been widespread during the conflict, and the most frequently reported form of rape was gang rape.⁵⁶ Much of the rape in Sierra Leone occurred in the late 1990s, at the height of the war. Survey data from the SLWCD show a spike in rape in 1998 and 1999, during which almost 70 percent of the rape for the entire course of the war was committed.⁵⁷ These two years of the war encompass the most intense years of fighting, including the January 6, 1999, invasion of the capital city of Freetown.⁵⁸ The SLWCD survey data show that

⁵³ See Cohen forthcoming for a brief case study that offers a more general examination of the causes of wartime rape in Sierra Leone and draws on the same set of survey data and interview evidence.

⁵⁴ Humphreys and Weinstein 2008.

⁵⁵ Humphreys and Weinstein 2004.

⁵⁶ Asher and Human Rights Data Analysis Group 2004.

⁵⁷ Data calculated from Asher and Human Rights Data Analysis Group 2004.

⁵⁸ Other data sources confirm that rape reached its height in the final years of the 1990s; e.g., Physicians for Human Rights 2002, 48.

the remaining reports of rape occurred at a fairly steady rate over the course of the conflict.

PATTERNS AMONG PERPETRATORS OF RAPE

Most of the wartime rape in Sierra Leone was reported to have been committed by the RUF rebels. Based on evidence from surveys and human rights reports, as well as the data collected by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the overwhelming majority of rape victims in Sierra Leone identified their perpetrators as members of the RUF.⁵⁹ It is important to note that this finding is not an artifact of the number of combatants in the RUF. Among the population of demobilized fighters, only about one-third of these, or about twenty-four thousand people, were RUF combatants. According to combatant demobilization data, the CDF was the largest armed group, with about 50 percent of the total combatants, and the SLA/AFRC was the smallest of the major fighting factions with around 12 percent.⁶⁰ Thus the RUF committed a disproportionate amount of the wartime rape in the conflict.

III. EVALUATING THE EVIDENCE: CAUSES OF FEMALE PERPETRATION OF WARTIME RAPE

TRADITIONAL PERSPECTIVE

The belief that women are “less inclined toward violence,” as reflected in the speech quoted earlier, is an example of how the traditional view of women often goes unquestioned. However, a more detailed analysis indicates that the traditional view is insufficient. Women can and do perpetrate violence in both peacetime and conflict settings, and theories of violence must be able to account for its existence. Recent literature rejects the notion that women are inherently nurturing and grapples with the reality that female combatants may be equally as prone to brutality as men.⁶¹

Interviewees in Sierra Leone reported that women were rumored to be especially vicious fighters and had a reputation for encouraging excessive violence. As one ex-combatant reported: “We would sometimes

⁵⁹ Physicians for Human Rights 2002; Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Sierra Leone 2004. In interviews, villagers would often identify their attackers simply as “rebels.” Observers have noted that soldiers would commit crimes out of uniform, sometimes as collaborators of the RUF, sometimes as subterfuge; see Smith, Gambette, and Longley 2004; Keen 2005; TRC of Sierra Leone 2004. There is no way to correct for these potential forms of bias. My assumption is that, on average, people are correct in their identifications of their attackers.

⁶⁰ Humphreys and Weinstein 2004.

⁶¹ McKelvey 2007.

put women in front when we were attacking villages because they could be the fiercest fighters.”⁶² Another said: “The women fighters were much more hot tempered than the men. The ladies would kill a lot of people—they were filled with anger.”⁶³ Scholarship on female insurgents in other settings reveals similar reports. Through interviews with female combatants in the Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland and the LTTE in Sri Lanka, Alison concludes that the women in these conflicts were reputed to be more violent than their male peers, perhaps because female combatants need to “compete for status and recognition in a traditionally patriarchal context.”⁶⁴

The traditional perspective assumes that violent forms of male bonding cannot happen in the presence of women. The implication in much of this literature is that the presence of just one woman can shame men into better behavior. Research, however, does not support this claim. Sociological studies of mixed-gender groups have shown that men may act more aggressively in the presence of women and that, in response, women may become more belligerent than they would have been in a female-only group.⁶⁵ This finding is exemplified by a statement made by a former RUF combatant who shared his experience fighting alongside women: “The men felt ashamed when a woman rebel would say, ‘Let’s go!’ to the men. That made us want to fight harder.”⁶⁶ The presence of women in mostly male groups, in general, is found to have little influence over the way an organization functions.⁶⁷ Women are rarely in positions of power to make decisions over military force, and when they are in such positions, women are thought unlikely to make decisions that are different from those made by their male counterparts.⁶⁸ The literature suggests that women working in male-dominated workplaces accept the status quo and do their best to fit in to the culture in a process known as “cooptation,”⁶⁹ and in experimental group settings, women’s aggressive behavior tends to mirror that of men.⁷⁰ Further-

⁶² Interviewee 26, former AFRC fighter, March 29, 2008.

⁶³ Interviewee 27, former RUF fighter, March 28, 2008. Other sources confirm that female rebels were reported to be more violent than men; see, for example, Keen 2005; and Coulter 2008.

⁶⁴ Alison 2004, 457. See also Sharlach 1999; Sharlach 2009; Bourke 2007.

⁶⁵ Bystydzienski 1993.

⁶⁶ Interviewee 12, former RUF fighter, May 29, 2007.

⁶⁷ Additionally, it is uncertain whether there is a tipping point at which the proportion of women present in a mostly male group significantly alters behaviors. Some research suggests that the number of women in a given group may increase the influence that women have, but others argue that raw numbers are irrelevant and that there must be women in leadership positions to effect changes in group behavior.

⁶⁸ Bystydzienski 1993.

⁶⁹ Bystydzienski 1993.

⁷⁰ Rabbie and Lodewijkx 1995.

more, studies conducted by the US Army found that women's presence did not greatly disrupt unit cohesion;⁷¹ nor was gender found to be a factor in terms of which students were subjected to military academy hazing violence.⁷² Gendered norms are still powerful in these settings, but not in the manner anticipated by the traditional perspective.

The hypothesized correlation between the large number of women fighters and low levels of civilian rape does not hold in Sierra Leone. In fact, data from Sierra Leone indicate that the proportion of women in an armed group is positively associated with the sexual violence committed by the group. The estimated percentage of women in each of the major fighting factions in Sierra Leone is displayed in Table 2, along with the estimated proportion of rape perpetrated by each group. These data suggest that the conventional wisdom that female combatants have a stifling effect on violence may ultimately be misguided. At the very least, the data contradict one of the central observable implications of the traditional perspective: groups with more women not only committed rape but actually committed *more* rape than did groups with fewer women. At least in Sierra Leone, the mere presence of women fighters did not appear to lessen, let alone eradicate the incidence of rape.⁷³

A second observable implication of the traditional perspective is that the perpetrators of rape should be male. This too is not supported by the evidence from Sierra Leone. Using the SLWCD survey data, 76 percent of the reported rape was gang rape; of the gang rape, about 75 percent was committed by male-only groups and 25 percent by mixed sex groups.⁷⁴ In other words, the survey data indicate that women participated in one in four of the reported incidents of gang rape.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Goldstein 2001, 201. Additionally, *Armed Forces and Society* has published many articles in recent years on the issue of whether women have an effect on military group cohesion. Some results suggest that women do not disrupt cohesion; however, other scholars (for example, van Creveld) argue that they do.

⁷² Pershing 2006.

⁷³ While this may still imply that only all-male groups within each armed group were committing wartime rape, data indicate otherwise.

⁷⁴ Using the sampling weights provided by Asher and Human Rights Data Analysis Group 2004, there were a total of 31,759 estimated reported rapes during the course of the war. Of these rapes, 75.8 percent (24,090) were gang rapes. Of the reported gang rapes, 17,928 or 74.4 percent were committed by male-only groups. Mixed-gender groups of perpetrators thus committed 6,163 gang rapes, or 25.5 percent, which constitute 19.4 percent of the total reported rape.

⁷⁵ The potential for several types of errors or biases that may have resulted in mistakenly reporting mixed-sex groups of perpetrators in the SLWCD survey was considered. First, many enumerators coded the existence of female perpetrators and in all regions of the country, reducing the possibility that the recording of the mixed perpetrator code was an enumerator error. Second, I hand checked all the original survey forms with a mixed perpetrator code for gang rape, eliminating the possibility that the mixed perpetrator codes were the result of a data entry error. Third, interviewee fatigue is not a concern for potential bias, given the structure of the survey, during which enumerators were instructed to allow the interview subjects to tell a narrative, and when needed, to ask open-ended questions for

TABLE 2
MAJOR COMBATANT GROUPS BY PROPORTION OF WOMEN AND
REPORTED RAPE PERPETRATION^a

<i>Faction</i>	<i>Percentage of Female Fighters in Group</i>	<i>Percentage of All Reported Rape Perpetrated by Group</i>
RUF	24.4	85.6
SLA/AFRC	8.8	8.3
CDF	1.9	0.1

SOURCES: Female fighter data from Humphreys and Weinstein 2004. Rape perpetration data calculated from Asher and Human Rights Data Analysis Group 2004, from responses that indicated perpetrators of rape were one of the following: RUF (includes RUF, Rebels, AFRC/RUF, Rebels/SLA, RUF/SLA, SLA/RUF), CDF (includes CDF and Kamajors), and SLA/AFRC includes (SLA, AFRC, and AFRC/SLA).

^aPercentage of reported rape does not sum to 100 because there are numerous other perpetrator groups not shown (for example, ECOMOG forces).

That one-quarter of the reported gang rape was committed by mixed-sex groups may seem shockingly high, relative to the expectation that the presence of at least one woman should make such rape unlikely. But this result makes sense when one considers that the RUF had the most female combatants and was the group that perpetrated the most rape. Groups of mixed-sex perpetrators were reported to be part of the RUF or a group of “rebels” in 79 percent of the cases. Notably, neither single women nor groups of women were reported as perpetrators of rape in the survey, indicating that gang rape was a male-led form of violence.⁷⁶

Finally, there was no evidence from interviews with male ex-combatants that they felt shame perpetrating acts of rape in front of female peers. The fighters—both male and female—reported that they felt that shame was reserved for victims of rape alone. For example, one respondent said: “[During a gang rape] sometimes we would feel shy in front of each other, especially when the commander was around. But the sex was a humiliation to the women [victims].”⁷⁷

clarification. Therefore, there is no possibility that interview subjects answered in the affirmative to a set of options without listening to the question. A final potential bias inherent in the survey methodology is that victims of rape may be more likely to report attacks that are public, such as gang rape, and that had atypical features, including female perpetrators and rape with objects; in this case, female perpetrators of gang rape may be overreported relative to their actual existence. However, there is no simple way to correct for this type of reporting bias.

⁷⁶ The fact that women did not commit rape (or, in fact, many other types of violence) in female-only groups suggests that female combatants were not segregated into all-female units. Despite rumors to the contrary, there is little evidence for the existence of female-only units in Sierra Leone. See Figure 1 for a summary of perpetrators of various forms of violence by sex and group size.

⁷⁷ Interviewee 17, former RUF fighter, June 1, 2007.

SUBSTITUTION

The substitution argument implies that female combatants may absorb the sexual needs of their male peers, thereby reducing the likelihood of noncombatant rape. Several problematic assumptions undermine this perspective. First, as Wood maintains,⁷⁸ the argument takes for granted that sexual gratification can be found only through acts of sexual intercourse. Additionally, it assumes that the central purpose of the rape of noncombatants is the gratification associated with the sexual act. These assumptions cannot account for the form that wartime rape takes and, in particular, why gang rape is so common in wartime; nor can they account for the persistence of rape with objects, a common form of violence and an act not obviously associated with gratification for the perpetrator.

An important implication of the substitution argument is that female fighters should be subjected to rape by male combatants or that there should be a system of coerced partnership, such as forced marriage, or the allowance of consensual sexual relationships. Although there are no statistical estimates on forced marriage in Sierra Leone, the SLWCD survey inquired about the incidence of "sexual slavery," a separate survey item from rape and a violation that may be seen as roughly equivalent to forced marriage.⁷⁹ About 70 percent of the reported cases of sexual slavery in the SLWCD survey were committed either by the RUF or by "rebels." In contrast, about 4 percent of the reported sexual slavery was committed by the SLA and less than 1 percent was committed by the CDF. Interview evidence also suggests that rape of female fighters was common, at least upon their initial introduction to the RUF. "Most of the RUF women were raped when they first joined," reported a group of female former RUF.⁸⁰ Counter to expectations, the RUF, which had the most female combatants and the majority of the reported sexual slavery, nonetheless committed the most rape of noncombatants.⁸¹ A final implication of the substitution argument, like the traditional perspective, is that perpetrators of rape are male. As

⁷⁸ Wood 2009.

⁷⁹ Legally, however, sexual slavery is a separate crime from forced marriage. See Mackenzie 2010 for a history of how these crimes were viewed by the Special Court in Sierra Leone. Although trial judges initially ruled that sexual slavery and forced marriage were the same crime, the Appeals Chamber determined that forced marriage involves harms beyond forced sex and constitutes a separate crime against humanity.

⁸⁰ Interviewees 30, 31, and 32, former RUF fighters, March 31, 2008. See also Peters and Richards 1998; Coulter 2008. More generally on sexual violence against fighters in African wars, see McKay and Mazurana 2004.

⁸¹ A similar pattern is apparent in Baaz and Stern 2009, where the authors found that soldiers in the DRC did not consider the presence of women in their units to have any effect on male fighters' desire to rape noncombatants.

described in the previous section, this was not the case in Sierra Leone, where women were reported to be active perpetrators of gang rape.

SELECTION

The selection argument implies that violence-seeking women and men join groups that permit them to perpetrate violence. The ex-combatant survey data show that women did volunteer to fight in Sierra Leone but in far lower numbers than did men.⁸² Of the fighters who served with the RUF, 93 percent of the women reported that they were abducted, compared with 85 percent of the men. The selection argument is centered on explaining the incidence of wartime rape as a result of the desires of especially violent volunteers. However, in the ex-combatant survey none of the male or female RUF *volunteers* reported that they were offered access to women or men as an enticement to join, making it unlikely that RUF volunteers of either sex sought to join in order to commit rape or to gain access to sexual partners.

Additionally, because the RUF consisted mostly of abducted people, the population of any given unit was a random collection of people within a given age range, almost none of whom could be said to have chosen to join.⁸³ Importantly, interview respondents who self-reported being abducted into a fighting faction also self-reported that they had committed wartime rape. It is not likely, therefore, that mostly RUF volunteers committed rape. While it may be the case that respondents are not being truthful about their decision to join, the general pattern is likely still true—the majority of the fighters in the RUF were kidnapped into the group, and those who were kidnapped were also perpetrators of rape. In sum, rape was not committed only by “opportunistic joiners”; rather, there is strong evidence that rape was committed by both volunteers and abductees.

Female perpetrators of gang rape provide strong evidence against selection theories of wartime rape. Peacetime studies find that individual rape perpetrators are almost always male,⁸⁴ and female sex offenders

⁸² Humphreys and Weinstein 2004. In the Sierra Leone war, 30 percent of male ex-combatants across all armed groups reported that they were abducted (85 percent of these served with the RUF), while 84 percent of all female fighters reported that they were abducted (88 percent of these served with the RUF).

⁸³ Although evidence of how random abduction may be is limited, Blattman 2009 uses the random nature of abduction in the Ugandan civil war to provide the basis for a natural experiment comparing ex-combatants and noncombatants.

⁸⁴ However, as Bourke 2007 shows, although only 1 percent of imprisoned rapists are women, women who commit acts of sexual violence are likely to be charged with lesser crimes than men who commit a similar act—thus, she argues, it is difficult to make accurate comparisons of male and female perpetrators of rape.

typically act with at least one male coperpetrator.⁸⁵ These observations indicate that while it is unlikely that women are seeking to join armed groups in order to commit rape, once they are part of an armed group, they may be coerced to participate in gang rape with male peers.

COMBATANT SOCIALIZATION

A final argument is that rape against noncombatants may result from a socialization process that takes place among the rank and file of certain combatant group units. The specified mechanism applies equally to all combatants; there is no expectation that male or female fighters will be relatively more or less likely to participate.

As discussed in the previous section, victims reported women as perpetrators of rape in Sierra Leone. An important observable implication of the combatant socialization theory is that the most common form of rape should be group rape. The combatant socialization argument can account for why wartime brings an increase in rape by multiple perpetrators when such violence is—perhaps universally—relatively rare during peacetime.⁸⁶ As previously described, women were reported as perpetrators only in acts of gang rape; men, by contrast, were reported as perpetrators in both single perpetrator rape and gang rape.

Interviews with ex-combatants shed light on how women participated in gang rape. Members of the RUF were the only ex-combatants interviewed who had knowledge of women in their respective factions participating in acts of gang rape. According to ex-combatants, the women in the RUF were involved in gang rape in a variety of ways. First, women in the RUF not only acted as liaisons to locate potential victims but also restrained victims while they were being raped. One woman said: “Women would tell the men that ‘I found a beautiful woman for you.’ We would help capture her and hold her down.”⁸⁷ Other interviewees repeated a similar description: “Women fighters would hold down unarmed women for men to rape.”⁸⁸ The fact that women would seek potential victims provides evidence that rape was seen as a way for the combatants to pursue intragroup acceptance as part of an organized process among combatants. One scholar made a similar observation about the phenomenon of gang rape in college fraternities, where providing a victim to be raped was a means for increasing cohesion and

⁸⁵ Bourke 2007.

⁸⁶ In one of the few surveys on peacetime gang rape conducted in an African country, Jewkes et al. 2006 found that approximately 14 percent of respondents in a randomized survey of 1,370 young men in rural South Africa reported participating in gang rape.

⁸⁷ Interviewee 28, former RUF fighter, March 29, 2008.

⁸⁸ Interviewee 24, former RUF fighter, March 28, 2008.

solidarity among perpetrators.⁸⁹ Although there are no systematic data on types of participation, restraining victims during gang rape appears to have been the most typical way for women to be involved as perpetrators, and it likely comprises the majority of the reports in the SLWCD survey.

Beyond holding victims down, interviewees witnessed female combatants raping other women with objects: "Women rebels would often be involved in rapes—some of the women RUF would hold onto the victims' hands, some women RUF would rape the women with bottles and with sticks."⁹⁰ Fighters noted that the women fighters did not seem to empathize with their victims. "The RUF women did not feel any mercy for the women [victims]," reported one former fighter.⁹¹ "Women fighters were under the influence of drugs so they did not even think about mercy for women being raped," one ex-combatant said.⁹² These replies suggest that the group pressures that compel men to participate in gang rape affected women in similar circumstances.

Evidence from Sierra Leone supports the idea that rape served a bonding function. Ex-combatants reported experiencing feelings of belonging in the aftermath of gang rape. Many of the fighters reported that rape was an activity they viewed as "fun"⁹³ or "entertainment."⁹⁴ As one ex-combatant said: "The rebels felt pleased that they were having so much sex, and we would brag to each other about enjoying it so much."⁹⁵ Others confirmed that rebels would often discuss their sexual prowess with each other, recounting the number of women they had raped during a particular raid. An RUF ex-combatant said: "[After raping] we would make fun by saying, 'That girl was sweet.'"⁹⁶ "[During the war] it was a 'jungle system' and watching each other was fun, in a way,"⁹⁷ said another fighter. Another noted, "We would watch each other and joke about how some guys were not doing it correctly."⁹⁸ Finally, another confirmed, "The entire unit watches. Everyone laughs and is jubilating."⁹⁹ One of the most revealing interviews was the following reply, to an open question about what activities the group

⁸⁹ O'Sullivan 1991, 146.

⁹⁰ Interviewee 24, former RUF fighter, March 28, 2008.

⁹¹ Interviewee 24, former RUF fighter, March 28, 2008.

⁹² Interviewee 26, former AFRC fighter, March 29, 2008.

⁹³ Interviewee 33, former SLA fighter, March 31, 2008.

⁹⁴ Interviewee 20, former SLA fighter, June 19, 2007.

⁹⁵ Interviewee 7, former RUF fighter, August 1, 2006.

⁹⁶ Interviewee 12, former RUF fighter, May 29, 2007.

⁹⁷ Interviewee 11, former RUF fighter, May 28, 2007.

⁹⁸ Interviewee 12, former RUF fighter, May 29, 2007.

⁹⁹ Interviewee 14, former RUF fighter, May 31, 2007.

would do together: "The group rape of women," said one man. "Afterward, we would feel good and talk about it a lot, discuss it among ourselves, and laugh about it."¹⁰⁰ These interviews provide ample evidence that rape was a cohesive activity, not something that divided the group. Additionally, they reveal common understandings of the norms relevant to sexual violence against civilians; similar to Baaz and Stern's findings from the DRC, these interviews reveal that fighters dealt with the uncertainty of war and the chaos of the "jungle system" by normalizing gang rape as a bonding tool.¹⁰¹

As additional evidence of the cohesive elements of rape, ex-combatants reported admiration, not disgust, for those who had perpetrated many rapes. In interviews, they described a culture in which those who had raped many women achieved a legendary status among their peers—one interviewee spoke with awe about a fellow combatant who had raped more than two hundred women.¹⁰² Ex-combatants reported that those who participated in rape in Sierra Leone were seen to be more courageous, valiant, and brave than their peers. Those who committed rape were respected by their peers as "big men"—strong and virile warriors.¹⁰³

One of the standard measurements of military unit cohesion is whether veterans stay in touch in the postwar period. Based on the survey of ex-combatants in Sierra Leone, members of the RUF were more likely than members of the CDF to stay in touch with friends from their faction after the war.¹⁰⁴ This finding is especially interesting because CDF members were mainly recruited by friends or relatives, whereas members of the RUF were overwhelmingly abducted. The argument presented here suggests that social cohesion was strengthened, at least in part, by participation in group rape.¹⁰⁵

WOMEN SOLDIERS VERSUS "FEMALES ASSOCIATED WITH THE WAR"

Although not the central focus of this analysis, it is important to note that women perpetrated many common types of violence in Sierra Leone. MacKenzie argues that despite substantial involvement in the

¹⁰⁰ Interviewee 27, former RUF fighter, March 29, 2008.

¹⁰¹ Baaz and Stern 2009 note a difference in soldiers' descriptions in the DRC between "lust rape" and "evil rape," the latter resulting from rage and including object rape and rape with the intention to kill. The interviews presented here do not indicate such a distinction between the intentions of rape, but the normalization of sexualized violence by the fighters is clear.

¹⁰² Interviewee 18, former RUF fighter, June 4, 2007.

¹⁰³ Interviewee 18, former RUF fighter, June 4, 2007.

¹⁰⁴ Humphreys and Weinstein 2004.

¹⁰⁵ The temporal variation in abduction of fighters is also roughly correlated with the level of war-time rape; see Cohen 2010.

armed groups in Sierra Leone, women's participation is marginalized; female fighters are often dismissively called "females associated with the war."¹⁰⁶ As illustrated in Figure 1, mixed-sex groups of perpetrators committed a significant proportion of much of the reported violence. These data provide stark evidence that female combatants were active members of the fighting factions. Indeed, some women fighters in Sierra Leone achieved infamous status as particularly brutal fighters. Several interview respondents described harsh female commanders such as Adama "Cut-Hand," a leader in the RUF who was rumored to beat infants to death in rice-pounding mortar and pestles.¹⁰⁷ Additionally, the ex-combatant survey data show that 10 percent of the women in the RUF reported that their first role in the faction was as a combat soldier (compared with 56 percent of the men), and 13 percent of female RUF reported that they received a weapon immediately upon entering their unit (compared with 38 percent of the men).¹⁰⁸ While women may have served some domestic functions within armed groups, the evidence demonstrates that women fighters participated in many forms of violence with their male counterparts.

COMPETING MECHANISMS

Here, I briefly consider several competing mechanisms for the observed patterns of violence in Sierra Leone. One alternative argument is that a feminist ideology in a combatant group may result in both a higher percentage of female combatants and a decreased propensity to rape noncombatants.¹⁰⁹ The underlying hypothesis is that there exists an inverse relationship between the number of women in an armed group and the propensity to rape civilians.¹¹⁰ This hypothesis can be tested empirically, and I have presented evidence that suggests the relationship, at the very least, does not hold in Sierra Leone.

Furthermore, an argument in which an ideology both attracts female recruits and discourages rape can apply only in conflicts where fighters have been persuaded to join a group voluntarily.¹¹¹ This was not

¹⁰⁶ MacKenzie 2009.

¹⁰⁷ Interviewees 30, 31, and 32, former RUF fighters, March 31, 2008.

¹⁰⁸ All data calculated from Humphreys and Weinstein 2004.

¹⁰⁹ Wood 2008, 346, argues that a feminist ideology "both encourages girls and women to join and discourages sexual violence." Similarly, Alison 2004 argues that women are more likely to be combatants in "liberatory" rebel movements with long-term goals of social change.

¹¹⁰ Wood 2006; see hypothesis 6, where Wood notes this pattern in Sri Lanka, El Salvador, Peru, and Colombia.

¹¹¹ Wood 2008, 332, notes that the LTTE also has had policies of forced recruitment of child soldiers, which may make it inappropriate for an ideologically based case study.

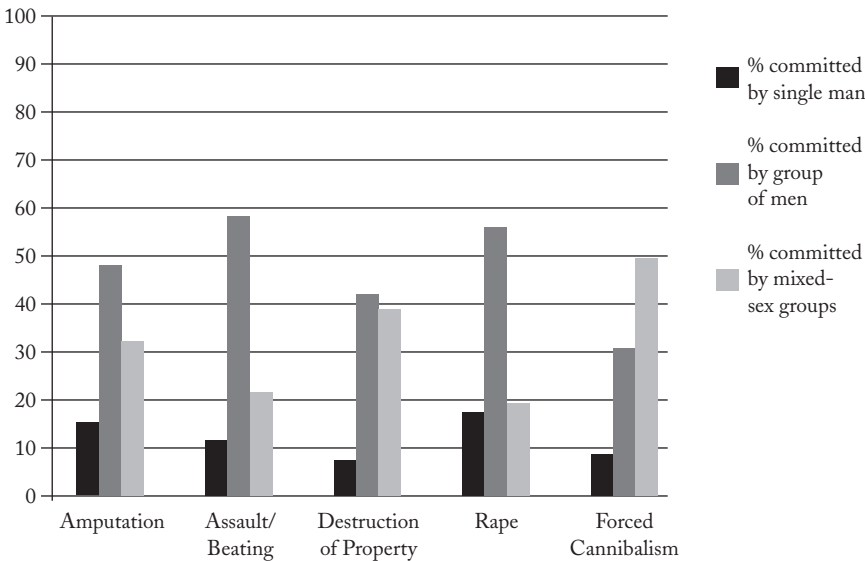


FIGURE 1
PERPETRATION OF VIOLENCE, BY GROUP SIZE AND SEX^a

SOURCE: All values calculated from Asher and Human Rights Data Analysis Group 2004.

^aGroups comprising only women were not reported to have committed amputation, forced cannibalism, destruction of property, or rape. 0.9 percent of the reported assault/beatings was committed by a group of women (not shown).

the case in Sierra Leone, where the vast majority of fighters in the RUF were forcibly recruited and where female RUF fighters reported a higher rate of abduction than did men.¹¹² The dynamic may be quite different in groups where women are being actively recruited to take up arms or in groups with an explicit feminist liberation ideology—admittedly, however, such groups are rare.¹¹³ Additionally, even in cases where women have been motivated by a liberation ideology, such as in Mozambique, scholars have found that women behaved similarly to men.¹¹⁴

There is little research on why armed groups may recruit women, but one might surmise many nonideological reasons, including as a last

¹¹² By contrast, none of the women in the CDF reported being abducted, while 2 percent of the men reported being abducted. All data calculated from Humphreys and Weinstein 2004.

¹¹³ In Cohen forthcoming, I estimate that about 45 percent of insurgent groups between 1980 and 2009 recruited their fighters by force.

¹¹⁴ Coulter 2009, 138.

resort to fill ranks when bodies are desperately needed. Evidence from other cases supports a desperation hypothesis. Bourke cites the shortage of military-aged men as one of the main reasons for the increased recruitment of women since the 1970s in the US and the UK.¹¹⁵ Wood writes that desperation was a factor in the recruitment of women into the LTTE.¹¹⁶ Ultimately, these data urge a caveat: norms of gender equality should not be assumed from the mere presence of women in armed groups.

A second alternative argument is that combatants—both men and women—were ordered by their leaders to commit acts of rape as part of a broader top-down military strategy. Indeed, Sierra Leone is often cited as a conflict in which rape was used as a “weapon of war.”¹¹⁷ But interviews revealed little evidence that combatants were ordered to rape. Of the thirty-four ex-combatant interview subjects, about 75 percent said that they had never seen or heard a commander give an order to rape; these responses run counter to the expectation that ex-combatants may want to claim that they were ordered to commit such violence.

Were the women forced to participate in acts of gang rape? The brief answer is yes, women were likely pressured to participate in much of the violence against noncombatants.¹¹⁸ Women were themselves often victims of violence; several interview subjects reported becoming bush wives to their attackers once they joined the RUF.¹¹⁹ Any analysis of the relationships between women in the RUF and their bush husbands, however, should not ignore the agency women had in the process—being a bush wife often ensured greater security for the wife, as well as other benefits.¹²⁰ Furthermore, by participating in and encouraging the rape of other women, the women fighters may have believed they made themselves safer from sexual violence within the group. Rape for these women may have in part served a self-protective purpose; this was not mentioned in interviews, however.

¹¹⁵ Bourke 1999, 342.

¹¹⁶ Wood 2009, 151.

¹¹⁷ For example, a 2001 documentary on wartime rape in Sierra Leone is entitled, *Operation Fine Girl: Rape Used as a Weapon of War in Sierra Leone*.

¹¹⁸ On agency and female fighters in Sierra Leone, see McKay 2005; and Coulter 2009.

¹¹⁹ Coulter 2009 has a similar finding; she writes that “almost all abducted women were raped” (p. 152).

¹²⁰ Some women chose to remain with their bush husbands after the war; some male and female interview subjects reported forming genuine relationships with their former victim/attacker that lasted into peacetime. See also McKay and Mazurana 2004; Coulter 2009.

The fact that women combatants were themselves victims of violence must be considered alongside the fact that men too were subjected to nearly identical forms of violence. Within the RUF, men and women alike were abducted into the group and then victimized again as members of the group. Both men and women faced similar conditions within the faction and made similar choices about how to cope with the dynamics of the group.¹²¹ Coulter maintains that it is important not to lose sight of the fact that men who were forcibly recruited as fighters were also victims of violence¹²² and that their agency was also limited by difficult circumstances, albeit in different ways than was the case for women. She writes: "... one does not escape being a perpetrator just because one is also a victim."¹²³ Although both male and female combatants rarely reported having heard a commander order the rape of a civilian, both men and women participated in brutal acts of gang rape of noncombatant women.

Lastly, some observers argue that combatants were drugged in order to compel them to commit acts of violence.¹²⁴ If this is the case, it is difficult to ascribe rational motivations to combatants' behavior. However, evidence shows that despite rumors of widespread abuse, only a minority of combatants reported drug use. Overall, about one-third of the combatants from both the RUF and the SLA reported "receiving drugs whenever they were available." Women and men in the RUF reported similar rates of drug use (35 percent and 34 percent, respectively).¹²⁵ The variation in drug use is not sufficient to account for the variation in the perpetration of wartime rape and cannot explain why the RUF perpetrated such a large proportion of the wartime rape.

IV. CONCLUSION

The evidence presented here supports the idea that female combatants in Sierra Leone were active members of their fighting factions. Women

¹²¹ Jones 2002, 88, comes to the same conclusion about the Rwandan genocide: "The evidence presented here suggests that when women are provided with positive and negative incentives similar to those of men, their degree of participation in genocide, and the violence and cruelty they exhibit, will run closely parallel to their male counterparts."

¹²² Coulter 2008.

¹²³ Coulter 2008, 69.

¹²⁴ Coulter 2009.

¹²⁵ Calculated from Humphreys and Weinstein 2004. The authors collected the variable to determine whether drugs may have been used as a material incentive in the process of "eliciting and sustaining participation." The way the question was asked does not reveal whether using drugs was optional, a reward, or forced.

in the RUF perpetrated group violence of all types, including acts of gang rape. The participation of women in gang rape is important evidence of the power of internal group dynamics as a cause of violence. Further, this analysis has implications that extend beyond the Sierra Leone civil war. Multiple examples of female perpetrators of sexual violence from other contexts indicate that the social pressure mechanism explored here may also be prevalent in other conflicts.

As scholars begin to grapple with the mounting evidence of female-perpetrated violence, new explanations will be required to account for the full reality of women's wartime experience. The argument offered here is one plausible explanation for why women perpetrate violence alongside men. Women and men are subjected to similar pressures from within armed groups and, facing similar circumstances, can be expected to commit similar atrocities. An additional observable implication of the combatant socialization argument is that the number of female recruits in a group should have little effect on violence outcomes. This may be especially true when fighters are mainly abducted and when women constitute a minority in a group, as frequently occurs in armed groups. The results presented here have theoretical implications for how scholars understand the relationship between victims and perpetrators of violence, as well as for current debates about gender, violence, and masculinity.

Gendered assumptions about the roles of women as fighters and as perpetrators of violence have had serious policy consequences and have resulted in women being largely excluded from various types of post-conflict policy processes. For example, while there are forty women being investigated for war crimes in Bosnia, not a single woman has been tried.¹²⁶ The view that women are not "real" combatants and powerful norms about the inherent nonviolence of women have also prevented female fighters from benefiting from demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration programs—programs from which women were largely excluded in Sierra Leone.¹²⁷ However, there are recent signs of change regarding the roles that women have had in the perpetration of atrocities. In June 2011, Pauline Nyiramasuhuko, the former Rwandan minister of family affairs, became the first woman found guilty of rape by an international tribunal for her role in encouraging attacks and for her responsibility as a superior.

Finally, the data presented in this study point to the need for greater care in research on violence and suggest avenues for future research.

¹²⁶ Husejinovic 2011.

¹²⁷ MacKenzie 2009.

As scholars begin to answer the call by the United Nations to collect more rigorous numerical data on wartime sexual violence, researchers should be aware of gendered assumptions—often deeply embedded in the conventional wisdom—when they set out to design surveys, interview protocols, and other data-collection tools.¹²⁸ Future research on wartime rape should be explicit in gathering evidence about specific details of perpetrators, including the sex of the attackers.

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¹²⁸ UN Security Council Resolution 1600, passed in December 2010, calls for increased data collection on sexual violence.

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