

Is sexual violence in conflict a new Trojan horse?



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The **Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict** took place at London's ExCel Centre between 10th and 12th June 2014. Amongst the fanfare and excitement at Angelina Jolie being involved in her role as Special Envoy for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, this event raised a lot of questions for me – questions which were only increased on the afternoon that I attended. I do not want to negate the reality or magnitude of the problem of sexual violence in conflict situations around the world and that this needs to be tackled, or to deny the experiences of the survivor-victims, I want to raise issue with how this is currently being addressed and suggest that the so-called humanitarian response from the UK Government has a wider agenda and may in fact be damaging.

My introduction to the summit was an **animation** created for the event, which raised a number of concerns for me. The childlike cartoon and narration immediately separates what is happening from reality, constructing it as a fantasy or dream. What is surprising is that the images show a Western scenario – the white family in Western dress with a large house, a pet dog and barbeque, the military aggressors, in tanks and helicopters, also white. The implication is that this could also happen to us 'over here'. The military men enter the home and there is a rape scene, however, the character who rapes, unlike his fellow soldiers who look on, is shown with the face of a monster. The next scene, apparently after the conflict (as if there is in fact the possibility of 'post-conflict') shows the vulnerable girl-child inside the Western house while the rapist with the monster-face is still outside. This creates the impression that there is safety from sexual violence within the home when in fact most women are at risk from **someone they know**. The following scene shows the 'monster' being tried and punished by a court which is not in fact the reality for many perpetrators of sexual violence, especially in contexts of conflict, and gives a false sense of confidence in the criminal justice system as a method for **accountability and retribution**. The way that the 'monsters' remain like this throughout the animation gives the impression that others involved – such as other soldiers, the prison guards, the judge, or the father – do not have the potential to also be 'monsters' and so restricts this to a limited number of evil 'others', separating men into the categories of monster/rapist and 'normal' men. The final message is that it is **#timetoact** for people as individuals and that stopping sexual violence in conflict is simply a mouse click away, therefore taking the onus from governments and international bodies and presenting this as a global problem that can be solved through social media campaigning. This divides 'rape as a weapon of war' from 'peacetime' sexual violence, with the implication that we can effectively tackle one whilst completely ignoring the other.

What surprised me about the summit itself was that the exhibition space and fringe events were free (while heads of state met behind closed doors for high-level meetings), usually these kinds of conferences are prohibitively expensive which begs the question of who is actually attending as those who arguably should be there, such as women's sector representatives, can rarely afford to be. It was also very well advertised with information on the tube and in free papers to reach wider audiences. The PR, helped by the '**Angelina Jolie effect**', created a media frenzy, and a huge entourage followed Jolie as she moved around the conference centre. This was a big event and corporate opportunity but none of the publicity or materials indicated who was paying for all this – surely not the UK Government during **times of austerity**?

In the centre of the conference space there was an exhibition of photos and artwork. There seemed to be a theme in the faces depicted, which was mirrored in the events in the conference programme – which countries were these women from? It was mainly central African countries (Rwanda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Sudan, Central African Republic, Somalia) being

profiled as well as Bosnia, Afghanistan, Syria, Columbia and Myanmar. What about other countries where there is conflict and (presumably) sexual violence? In fact women at the conference raised the issue of women in **Bangladesh** and **Kashmir** and asked why they were being ignored. Northern Ireland was also not included even though this is a supposedly 'post-conflict' zone and part of the UK but has also been affected by the severe **cuts to sexual violence services**. This therefore raises the question of which definition of conflict is being used and how the decision is being made about which countries are labelled as 'in conflict' or 'post-conflict'.

So what was particular about the countries that were included? Many of them have a colonial or more recent neo-colonial history, many of them are rich in natural resources, and many have been a focus in the so-called 'war on terror' and are tied in the minds of Western governments to ideas of religious extremism. There seemed to be some specific motivations for the focus on particular countries, rooted in political positioning by the UK Government and international commercial interests. What is the agenda of the UK Government? Has sexual violence become the latest way to justify imperialism and military intervention, and a way to gain control of resources and ensure political positioning as a tool of globalisation?[1] Previous understandings of humanitarian discourses as a way to maintain and justify imperialist power have looked at LGBT rights and ideas of homonormativity[2] as a way to distinguish the West from the rest and create a hierarchy of 'civilisation'. It has also been argued[3] that the idea of women's human rights and responses to violence against women in particular are used to separate certain 'cultures' and countries in terms of progress and modernity and then become a way to legitimise interventions which seek to 'civilise'. This strong global focus on sexual violence in conflict seems to be doing very similar things. These ideas also feed into cultural essentialism and the construction of 'other' women as 'victims' of their 'cultures' and so in need of 'saving'[4]. It has been argued that Third World Women are seen as a population that is vulnerable, but also one that needs to be regulated – and that the narratives of violence against women become a medium for this[5]. In this way, the British Government is using humanitarianism as a discourse to maintain the dominant position of the UK globally and as a way to distinguish themselves from 'uncivilised' countries through ideas around sexual violence.

The images of the women in the exhibition also highlighted who was not so clearly included in the picture – the sexual aggressors and perpetrators of violence. In the sessions I attended and the films I saw these figures were shadowy and amorphous, referred to as 'they' and 'them' but the implication was that these men were indigenous and like in the cartoon, they could be in your community although not in your home. In this way the white, Western aid workers, UN and DfID representatives and military personnel cannot be included, **their involvement** in sexual violence is denied and ignored and their only role is to 'save brown women from brown men'[6]. The impact of sexual violence in conflict on **men and boys** was also notably absent. The role played by the UK Government and multinational corporations in the conflicts being criticised, and so their implication in the sexual violence itself, is also ignored and indeed those who raised it were **silenced**. The conference was **not a free space** for those who spoke out and asked the Government to be held to account for the impact of their global interventions. Maybe these messages hit too close to home in seeking to expose the imperialist agenda lurking under the surface of the summit and the discourse surrounding it.

Nevertheless, some of these concerns did surface throughout the conference. In the sessions that I attended, Government representatives faced difficult questions about their role in **deporting** women **survivors** who are refugees and asylum-seekers in the UK back to conflict situations and the lack of support for these women. This was linked to the severe **cuts to services** supporting survivors of violence more generally in the UK which continues to be justified by the limits of 'austerity'. It was noted that the Government should 'get its own house in order' in terms of the response to violence against women and girls and the issue of **cuts to services** here in the UK before preaching to other governments about their obligations under international frameworks such as **CEDAW**. This is especially pertinent after the recent visit to the UK and critical report from the **UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women**. The hypocrisy of the position the Government had constructed for itself in terms of tackling sexual violence internationally was not lost on the participants. Across the conference it also became clear that violence against **women**

was understood as a diverse and global problem, and that a strong focus on rape as a weapon of war could deflect attention from other forms of violence, including rape, within the home. To participants attentive to the contradictions and nuances within this debate, the summit may well have left more questions than answers. As the UK and other governments carry this agenda forward (so far 151 countries have signed the protocol coming out of the summit), what about those affected by sexual violence at home and globally while their experiences are (ab)used as a Trojan horse for wider political manoeuvring?

[1] For example previous narratives around sex trafficking have been linked to immigration control. See for example [Andrijasevic \(2007\)](#)

[2] Duggan, L. (2002) *The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

[3] E.g. Butler, J. (2008) 'Sexual Politics, Torture and Secular Time', *British Journal of Sociology* 59:1 pp.1-23

[4] Mohanty, C. (1991) 'Under Western Eyes. Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses'. In Mohanty, C., Russo, A and Torres, L. (Eds.) *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. Indiana University Press

[5] Abu-Lughod, L. (2002) 'Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others', *American Anthropologist* 104:3 pp.783-790

[6] Spivak, G. (1988) 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' In (Eds.) Nelson, C. and Grossberg, L. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Macmillan Education: Basingstoke.

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