
Our Bodies, Their Battlefields: What War Does to Women

By Christina Lamb

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Reviewed by Ambreen Yousuf, Jamia Millia Islamia

Woman is the first casualty in any war and her safety is undervalued in the dominant notions of security –which unambiguously emphasizes the survival of modern states. Women have suffered from Southeast Asia to the Middle East and Latin America due to armed conflicts. *Our Bodies, Their Battlefields* explores the intensity of the psychological and physical damage imposed by armed forces and militia on women. Christina Lamb documents numerous incidents of inhumane treatment and terrorism conducted by self-declared religious zealots and militias. Drawing from her in-depth reportage and ethnographic details compiled over a period of nearly three decades, Lamb brings out a detailed assessment of victims' ordeals and their heart-rending stories. Throughout the book, the author demonstrates how rape has been used as a workable tool for terrorizing the 'other' community on the pretext that they belong to a separate ethnicity or race.

Our Bodies, Their Battlefields opens with a harrowing account of sexual abuse committed, during war, against women, young girls, and children. Lamb argues that terror groups like the Army of Jesus, ISIS and Boko Haram have used rape as a weapon of modern warfare as much as they have used weapons like the Kalashnikov rifle and the machete (p. 22). Over time, rape has become a delib-



erate and systematic instrument to punish and disgrace the enemy. Lamb skillfully draws attention to the distortion of religious concepts by self-proclaimed religious leaders who increasingly invoke their religious and social position to affect the subjugation of women in their communities.

The book is organized into fifteen chapters, a prologue, and a postscript. Each chapter maps out sexual crimes perpetrated by terrorists, militias, or armed forces during warfare. Lamb argues that rape may be as old as war but is a preventable crime. Unlike killings, warfare rape is under-reported due to its stigma (p. 23). Using oral history as a method, Lamb shows how sexual violence is committed in the name of 'religion' and 'region' to drive out minority communities whose members are labeled 'non-human' and 'infidel.'

Lamb first broadly focuses on the 'reign of rape terror' wreaked by terrorist groups-ISIS in Syria and Iraq, and Boko Haram in Nigeria. These terror outfits are characterized by religious extremism and intolerance and share a common theme of denouncing the West, Western education, and democracy. They also share a pattern of devastating vil-lages and school buildings, looting and pil-laging, abducting, raping, and killing women, and leaving older men and women dead behind them. Lamb recapitulates the struggles

of victims who escaped the clutches of ISIS, like Turko, a Yazidi woman and a rape survivor brought by ISIS fighters as a sex slave and sold multiple times.

Second, this book centers around the 'reign of rape terror' unleashed by army or military forces. Lamb recounts the previously unheard stories of women from Rohingya, Bangladesh, Rwanda, Bosnia, and Argentina. In Rohingya, the army used rape as a systematic tool to expel the ethnic minority whom they did not consider human. Through the anguished tales of three Rohingya victims, Lamb unveils the 'crimes against humanity' committed by Burmese soldiers and Buddhist mobs and the use of the threat of rape to terrify the Rohingya population. Focusing on the Bangladeshi war of Liberation, Lamb lifts the curtain on the conduct of Pakistani soldiers who committed serious crimes, including gang raping, and impregnating Bangladeshi women; she recounts how one woman was raped multiple times by at least fifty men.

In Sarajevo, Lamb reports that between 20,000-50,000 women were subjected to gang-rape by Serbian forces during the longest siege in history. According to the author, the aim of rape in Bosnia was threefold: to humiliate the enemy's women, traumatize the Bosnian population and force them to flee, and/or to change the ethnic ratio through mass rape. The book also documents how similarly horrible incidents transformed the Congolese 'City of Joy' into 'the rape capital of world,' where around 1,000 women and girls per day, ranging in age from eighteen months to eleven years old, were raped by the so-called Army of Jesus 'Jeshi ya Yesu.' In this epidemic of sexual violence, local politicians used their political influence and money to escape persecution for their crimes. The enormity of the sexual violence in Congo can

be realized from the fact that Congolese surgeon Dr. Mukwege risked his own life to treat thousands of rape victims.

Our Bodies, Their Battlefields sums up the sexual violence wreaked by terrorists, militia, and armed forces across four continents and concludes that women are the most prevalent and worst sufferers of the resultant physical and psychological damage. Lamb provides valuable insights to understand better the system of justice, which has generally favored men. For instance, while investigating the trials of former ISIS fighters and recruits, Lamb underscores that the system of courts and prosecution in Iraq are gender-biased; men and women do not receive equal treatment: the system does not deliver justice to those women whom ISIS men fighters raped, but rather questions their credibility. Lamb parses the difference between 'warfare rape' and 'rape in peace' in terms of gender disparity when it comes to delivering justice, drawing our attention to the fact that half of the women who were raped were left with some form of venereal disease.

Regarding the history of rape, Lamb posits that rape has existed from time immemorial, but the first documented use of rape as a tool of war to inculcate fear started in 1936 during the Spanish Civil War (p. 313). She presents different historical incidents in which rape and pillage were used to terrorize the people and achieve political gain. For instance, rape was used by Stalin's troops, the Japanese army, Vikings, and Mongols. She concludes that the soldiers and militia of almost every country have used rape not only to conquer their enemies but also, appallingly, to 'entertain' themselves.

The strength of the book lies in the fact that the author deftly contextualizes and explains the use of rape by men 'as the easiest weapon'

with which to set up control over their opponents by targeting women. Lamb concludes that men not only fight their battles on the battlefields but also ‘over’ the bodies of women. *Our Bodies, Their Battlefields* urges women to rise from the exiles of their silence. Lamb provides elaborate information on sexual exploitation and identifies the multiple challenges that rape survivors face in presenting their testimony. Lamb argues that while women are the most prevalent sufferers of sexual vio-

lence, some men are the silent victims of rape and other forms of sexual abuse. Furthermore, she argues that men and women face multiple, serious challenges while addressing sexual violence and investigating torture. Based on interviews and extensive fieldwork, *Our Bodies, Their Battlefields* is a remarkable contribution that will help scholars working at the intersection of gender, sexuality, international politics, and terrorism. It is an important book of lasting relevance.

Small State Security Dilemma: Kuwait After 1991

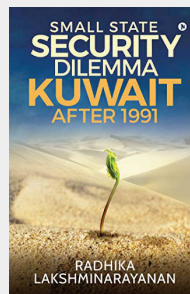
By Radhika Lakshminarayanan

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On August 2, 1990, Iraqi forces entered Kuwait and invaded the small Gulf kingdom within two days. The invasion of Kuwait was devastating for the entire region in the post-Cold War era, as for the first time an Arab state invaded another Arab country. The international coalition forces led by the U.S. repulsed the Iraqi aggression and Kuwait was liberated in 1991. The Kuwaiti invasion was transformative for intra-Arab relations, identities and alignments; regional security structures; relations with extra-regional powers and even the Arab-Israeli conflict.

While there is an exhausting literature on this particular period, Radhika Lakshminarayanan’s recent book, *Small Security Dilemma: Kuwait after 1991*, focuses on Kuwait’s strategies of survival as a small state in a turbulent regional environment since its liberation. Lak-



shminarayanan’s academic interest in Kuwait traces back to 1993, when she visited Kuwait for the first time and the physical and psychological impacts of the invasion were still evident. Dr. Lakshminarayanan is an associate professor at the American University of the Middle East, Kuwait; her research focuses on small state studies, Middle East foreign policy and diaspora studies.

The book consists of five thematically designed chapters in addition to an introduction and a conclusion. In the first chapter, “Small States in a VUCA World,” the author defines the concepts of small states, their unique security needs and the regional security complex. Further, she exclusively focuses on the evolution of the balance of power, small-state alliance strategies and small-state security dilemmas in the literature. She articulates the