Women and the Genocidal Rape of Women:  
The Gender Dynamics of Gendered War Crimes

Laura Sjoberg, Ph.D., J.D.  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Political Science  
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University  
503 Major Williams Hall (0130)  
Blacksburg, VA 24061  
617.875.6653  
sjoberg@vt.edu www.laurasjoberg.com

Abstract: Expanding on work from my 2007 book, Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women’s Violence in Global Politics (with Caron Gentry), this chapter looks at the dynamics of women’s participation in the war crime of genocidal rape against other women. It asks both about why women participated and about how their participation was portrayed in media and scholarly accounts. The chapter looks at these questions by exploring five cases of women’s (alleged) commission of the war crime of genocidal rape. It concludes with a reformulated approach to the laws and norms against genocidal rape in the international community, taking account of women’s roles in the crime not only as (often) victims but also as (sometime) perpetrators.

Brief Bio: Laura Sjoberg (BA, University of Chicago; Ph.D., University of Southern California, J.D. Boston College) is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Dr. Sjoberg’s areas of teaching and research include: international security, gender in international relations, the Middle East, active learning (debate, mock trial, model UN), and quantitative and qualitative methods. Dr. Sjoberg is author of Gender, Justice, and the Wars in Iraq (Lexington Books, 2006) and Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women’s Violence in Global Politics (with Caron Gentry, Zed Books, 2007). She is editor of New Problems, Old Solutions: Rethinking 21st Century Security (with Amy Eckert, Zed Books, forthcoming, 2008), Women and Wars: Contested Histories, Uncertain Futures (a textbook, with Carol Cohn, Polity Press, forthcoming, 2009), and Gendering Global Security: Feminist Perspectives (Routledge, forthcoming, 2009).
Since the end of the Cold War, rape and violence against women have been increasingly recognized as war crimes in international law (MacKinnon 2001, 897; Fitzpatrick 1994; Dietz 1996). While there had previously been an inconsistent history of the punishment of wartime rape (e.g., MacKinnon 2001; Chang 1997), the 1990s saw the development of a legal cannon firmly classifying it as a war crime. Courts have also recently begun to recognize that rape and genocidal rape are different war crimes, where rape is a crime against its victim and women generally, and genocidal rape is those things used as a weapon against an ethnic or national group, attacking racial purity, national pride, or both.

This distinction has been made in litigation concerning the Bosnian conflict, where genocidal rape was defined as rape “with the specific intent of destroying [their] ethnic-religious groups” (Kadic v. Karadzic, 70 F.3d 232 (2nd Cir 1995)). The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda also found that instances of rape can “constitute genocide in the same way as any other so long as they were committed with the specific intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a particular group, targeted as such” (Prosecutor v. Akayesu, Case No. ICTR 96 4 T (1998), 694). Accordingly, the court found that “the rape of Tutsi women was systematic and was perpetrated against all Tutsi women and solely against them” (Akayesu, ICTR 96 4 T, 694, 731).

Given the proliferation of rape as a weapon of genocide in the 1990s, scholars have begun analyzing the relationship between rape and racial extermination (Card 2003). This work, more often than not, defines genocidal rape as a crime where men are the perpetrators and women are the victims. As Frances Pilch (2002, 4) describes, “the revolutionary changes that have taken place in this area of the law in large part reflect the growing mobilization and influence of non-governmental organizations articulating the importance of the rights of women.” Similarly, Todd Salzman (1998) has characterized genocidal rape as “an assault against the female gender, violating her body and its reproductive capabilities as a ‘weapon of war.’”

The observations of genocidal rape as a gendered tactic are important and accurate. Wartime rape is an experience which is almost exclusively reserved for those persons
biologically classifiable as female, and exclusively for those who are gendered female (and feminized) in political and social relations. Several feminist scholars have identified genocidal rape as a key threat to women’s security (Hansen 2001, 59; Blanchard 2003) and as a part of an air of permissibility to attack women in war (Gardam 1993). Judith Gardam explains that “it is difficult to find any support for the view that non-combatant immunity at any time in its development has included [effective] protection from rape” (1993, 359). Gardam contends that this is a linchpin of gender subordination because “nowhere is women’s marginalization more evident than in the attitude of the law of armed conflict to rape, an experience limited to women” (1993, 358-9). She notes, therefore “in one sense, rape is never truly individual, but an integral part of the system ensuring the maintenance of the subordination of women” (Gardam 1993, 363-4).

The puzzle that this chapter seeks to address is one that, in some ways, interrupts the discourse of genocidal rape as a crime that men commit against women. While that characterization is, as detailed above, largely accurate, women have participated in, encouraged, and led genocidal rape. If genocidal rape is the most extreme site of women’s marginalization, a key threat to women’s security, a communication of domination, and an integral part of the system ensuring the maintenance of the subordination of women, how can we make sense of women’s perpetration of such an act? Why do women commit an act that subordinates women?

With this question comes a whole host of other curiosities about women who commit genocidal rape. Why are they largely invisible in the international media and legal discourses surrounding genocidal rape? When women accused of or involved with genocidal rape do appear in politics, the media, and the courts, how are they characterized? How is the apparent contradiction between their participation in genocidal rape and its gender-subordinating implications resolved in those narratives, if it is?

This chapter looks at the dynamics of women’s participation in the war crime of genocidal rape against other women. It asks both about why women participate in genocidal
rape and how their participation is consumed and presented in media and scholarly accounts. The chapter looks at these questions by exploring five cases of women’s (alleged) commission of the war crime of genocidal rape. It concludes with a reformulated approach to the laws and norms against genocidal rape in the international community, taking account of women’s roles in the crime not only as (often) victims but also as (sometime) perpetrators.

Women’s Purported Motivations for Perpetration of Genocidal Rape

Scholarly and media accounts present a number of reasons that women participate in political violence generally and genocidal rape specifically. In previous work, Caron Gentry and I (2007) have identified these as the mother, monster, and whore narratives. The mother narratives feature women’s motherhood as a key motivator for their participation in violence. The mother narrative has two general strands – one that portrays women perpetrators of genocide as nurturing mothers, whose role in the conflict is to take care of and provide for their men – the fact that those men happen to be participating in genocide (and therefore nurturing them is too) does not change the women’s role in society or perception of their familial duty. The other strand of the mother narrative portrays women who commit genocide as vengeful mothers – avenging the deaths of their husbands, brothers, or fathers at the hand of those on the other side of the conflict.

The second narrative we’ve identified is the monster narrative. This story of women’s motivation for involvement in genocide frames women perpetrators as severely psychologically disturbed. These stories tell women perpetrators as crazier and more monstrous than the men that they act with or alongside. Women’s monstrosity, in these stories, comes from the sort of irrational anger only women could have, or feelings of personal inadequacy coming from the inability to marry or have children. The final narrative we’ve identified is the whore narrative. In the whore narrative, women’s participation in genocide is either defined by erotomania or erotic dysfunction. The erotomania story tells of women sexually obsessed with and therefore controlled by men – of women’s sexuality gone wrong and out of control. These women are
portrayed as having committed genocide because their sex drive had gone out of control, and female sexuality at its worst is violent and brutal. The story of erotic dysfunction tells as story of a woman who has turned to violence because she is either unwilling to or unable to please men. These women are portrayed as having turned to violence because they were unable to function/serve as real women, which requires getting married and having children.

All of these stories about why women commit genocide share several things. First, they assume that the problem of why women commit genocide is a problem separate from the question of why men commit genocide (or even the question of why people generally commit genocide). Second, they preserve a distinction between women who are capable of violence and real or normal women who remain, as we have always assumed, more peaceful than men. Third, though real or normal women are seen as more peaceful than men, these stories depict women’s violence as the result of the excesses of femininity. Finally, these narratives imply that women cannot both be victims of genocide (as a class) and perpetrators of genocide (as individuals or as a group) – it has to be one or the other. Often, both in the public eye and in the academic literature, the identification of women as perpetrators has traded off with the recognition of women as victims.

This is all the more true because, if it seems unnatural for women to perpetrate war violence and genocide, it seems even more unnatural for women to participate in, lead, encourage, and plan the sexual violation of other women. If, after all, as argued above, rape is a cornerstone of women’s oppression, women’s participation in rape is a perpetration of gendered oppression – by the oppressed. Certainly, this has happened in the past (Jews who participated in the Holocaust, Tutsis who participated in the Rwandan genocide, etc.) Still, there is something all the more unsettling about it when the violations discussed are specifically sexual in nature. There seems to be an assumed consensus that women would not rape women; much less do so in the context of a genocidal conflict.
In the empirical snapshots about women alleged to have committed genocidal rape in this chapter, we will not find stories of women who are more peaceful than, more reserved than, or more sensitive than men. But we will also not find women held equal to men, even when they are committing similar crimes for the same political purposes. Instead, we will find women framed as instances of femininity gone awry – examples why other women should control their impulses stay within the mold of accepted femininity. In each of these stories, we will see the double move of sensationalizing *that women rape women* and distancing women rapists both from agency in their own actions and from normal femininity.

The LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community in the United States has done a substantial amount to document and research violence that women commit towards women. As Lori Girshick (2002) explains, “woman-to-woman sexual violence is an invisible form of sexual violation because of our denial that women are sexual perpetrators.” In this context, while some “take comfort in statistics showing how rare woman-on-woman assault is” (Marlowe 1999), others see the recognition of woman-on-woman sexual violence as a reason to reevaluate our understandings of what women are (and what they are capable of), of the meaning of gender subordination, and of our understandings of and laws about violence.

Taking a page from that analysis, we can see that currently, the international relations community generally and those scholars engaged in the study of genocide specifically can be described as taking comfort in how rare woman-on-woman genocide and/or genocidal rape is. Those accounts that do recognize women’s participation in genocide explain their actions in terms of the mother, monster, and whore narratives discussed above – in terms of the extreme expression of femininity gone wrong, while maintaining a space for the innocence of real or normal women. Several accounts have also read women’s perpetration of genocide, genocidal rape, and other sexual crimes as a *reversal* of gender subordination – where women have become the perpetrators, and are therefore no longer the victims.¹
The account in the remainder of this chapter resists all of those trends, and sees the recognition of women’s participation in genocide generally and in sex-based manifestations of genocide, such as genocidal rape, specifically, as a reason to reevaluate our understandings of what women are (and what they are capable of), the meaning of gender subordination, and our understandings of and laws about violence.

**Five Snapshots: Women Accused of Genocidal Rape**

**Darfur: Singing Rape into Existence**

A number of human rights groups have documented that women have played a role both in the commission of crimes against other women and in the encouragement and celebration of men’s commission of those crimes in Darfur. Women, called Hakama or Janjaweed women, “stirred up racial hatred against black civilians during attacks on villages in Darfur and celebrated the humiliation of their enemies” by singing during the commission of rapes and other atrocities (Amnesty International 2004). Sudan Watch (2006) also observed that “Hakama appear to have directly [physically] harassed the women who were assaulted, and verbally attacked them.” Phyllis Chesler (2004) adds that a number of the women cheer their men on and “utter racial insults to the women being raped.” A woman named Amani Dahia Mohammed reports being “attacked by 8 Janajaweed women, being kicked and whipped with sticks ... attacked and brutally bitten” (Reliefweb 2005).

Sensationalized accounts of these women’s participation in rape related to the genocide have been featured on tens of thousands of news sites and internet blogs, and have been incorporated into work from the academic and policy worlds (Vasagar and MacAskill 2004). A key feature in the re-productions of reports of women’s involvement in these genocidal rape has been the paradox of women’s participation in violence against women, and the inference that genocidal rape is somehow more twisted and more serious when women participate (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 145). In fact, a Google search for “Janjaweed women” four years later finds
more hits (594) for the story about women’s participation in the rapes in Darfur than a search for “genocidal rape” and “Darfur” finds analyzing the genocidal rapes more generally (416).

**Biljana Plavsic: Rape as a Tool of Ethnic Cleansing**

Bijana Plavsic was Acting President of the Serb Republic in 1992, and again between 1996 and 1998 (Mudis 2003). Throughout her academic (she was a biologist) and political careers, Plavsic had given many speeches advocating ethnic cleansing, sometimes even inferring that rape was an appropriate method to achieve political goals (BBC News 2003). She “used her knowledge of biology to convince people to share her ethnic hatred” and argued that “Bosnian Muslims were ‘genetically deformed Serbs” (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 151; Fitzpatrick 2000). After the conflict, the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia accused her of “genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes for a series of crimes, including rape crimes, committed by the Serb military, political, and government authorities” under her command (Askin 2003). Specifically, she was accused of masterminding and overseeing the Serbian genocidal rape strategy.

Accounts of Plavsic’s participation in/leadership of genocide have consistently featured sexual language and sexualized stories, including allegations that she has sexual relationships with a number of Serbian warlords (BBC News 2003; Suljalic 2003). Her violence is also attributed to her maternal instinct to challenge men into masculinity, “goading” men into committing rape and other violence (Ansah 2004). Plavsic’s involvement in genocidal rape was also blamed on her (apparent) madness, as she was labeled a “female Mengele” by Slobodan Milosevic (BBC News 2003). Another place that gender was prominent in stories about Plavsic was in discussions of her sentencing, where witnesses used her womanhood to point out her humanity and argue for mitigating circumstances and a lighter sentence (Mudis 2003, 717).

**Pauline Nyiramasuhuko: First Woman Charged with Genocidal Rape**

In 1997, “the ICTR established an incredible precedent by being the first tribunal ever to charge a woman with genocide and rape” (Baltahazar 2003, 46; Harman 2003). Pauline
Nyiramasuhuko, who had held the cabinet position of Minister for the Family and Advancement of Women during the Rwandan genocide, “was charged with two charges of rape: one as a crime against humanity and the other as a violation of the Geneva conventions on war crimes” (Baltahazar 2003, 47). As a member of the Council of Ministers, Nyiramasuhuko “had been open and frank at cabinet meetings, saying that she personally was in favor of getting rid of all Tutsi” (Melvern 2004, 229).

The allegations against Nyiramasuhuko include being a key planner of the genocide (Wood 2004), instigating the strategy of genocidal rape in the conflict (Landesman 2002b), directly commanding troops to rape women before they killed them (Landesman 2002a), establishing a system of sexual slavery (Landesman 2002b), and creating new tactics of sexual and other torture to inflict on the victims of the genocide prior to their death (Landesman 2002a).

News stories and academic accounts about Nyiramasuhuko’s alleged leadership of genocidal rape emphasize the special atrocity of woman-on-woman sexual violence. While explanations of her behavior are careful to distinguish her from regular or normal women who are seen as incapable of this sort of violence, they also refer to her atrocities as a case of her motherhood and sexuality gone wrong – womanhood at its worst. Her case has been especially sensationalized, appearing in the mainstream media a decade after the alleged atrocities took place. Miller (2003, 373) argues that the case has gotten so much attention because “this sort of crime committed by a woman seems almost unfathomable because, historically, it is men who commit or instigate rape.” Several theorists have argued that Nyiramasuhuko’s behavior debunks myths of “the special victimization of women” (Sperling 2006, 638), but Nyiramasuhuko has argued that it is exactly women’s pacifism and victimization that proves her innocence – contending that “if there is a person who says a woman – a mother – killed, then I’ll confront that person” (Landesman 2002a).

_Nazi Women’s Violation of Women Prisoners_
It is well known that several women served the Third Reich in Germany as prison guards, and that many of them were complicit in or actively involved in the terrible things that happened in concentration camps leading up to and during the Second World War. A less-emphasized element of these women’s involvement, however, is the allegation that several of them committed sex-based and sexual crimes against women held at those camps. Two women particularly have been accused of crimes that constitute the personal and sexual violation of women prisoners: Ilse Koch and Dorothea Binz.

Ilse Koch was the wife of Commandant Karl Koch at the Buchenwald concentration camp, where she became a guard and allegedly participated in a substantial amount of torture and terror in her role there. The most infamous stories about her cruelty chronicle her collecting tattoos from the skin of women prisoners and using those pieces of human skin to decorate her house, creating lampshades and other decorations (Weber 2003). Even outside of accusation (which has been contested), Koch’s reputation was one of sadism and cruelty towards prisoners, whom she is alleged to have abused physically and sexually (Pryzembel 2001). Accounts of her torture of women prisoners were a key factor in her receiving a life sentence at the end of the war.

Another woman accused of sadistic and sexual violence against women was Dorothea Binz, who was a guard at Auschwitz. Binz’s guard duties included watching over around 50,000 women and children prisoners and training other guards (Christie 2006). She is “said to have supervised gas chamber killings, shootings, starvations and freezings” (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 62; Brown 2002). She was accused, among other things, of beating, shooting, whipping, and sexually abusing women prisoners (Christie 2006).

The women who perpetrated war crimes in Nazi Germany were often characterized as the pawns of their husbands (who were often SS members), or as carefree teens who were unaware that their actions were wrong or had broader consequences. The ones that were given any agency in their violence were characterized as sick, demented, or emotionally unstable. One
narrative blames feminine creativity (an intense desire to decorate?) for Ilse Koch’s actions. These women, like other women in this chapter, were characterized as, on the one hand, having committed crimes that constituted genocide and sexual assault (genocidal rape was not yet a recognized war crime) and, on the other hand, as both incapable of the sort of intentionality that made this sort of thing a crime and an anomaly among women.

**Women as Perpetrators of the Armenian Genocide**

Scholars of the Armenian genocide describe it as a terrible experience for women, who were raped, deported, and sold into sex slavery, even as teenagers, if they were lucky enough to survive the initial massacres. As S. D. Stein (2001) notes, “At one place, the new bride of a priest was raped repeatedly by the raiders, while her husband, the priest, watched her torment. The priest saw her die before his eyes, and then he himself was killed after being mutilated terribly.” The treatment of pregnant women and women with new-born babies is reputed to have been particularly pitiless.

In most historical tales of this genocide, it is told as one carried out by men against men and women. Several close studies of the genocide, however, have revealed that there were women perpetrators of genocide generally and of sex crimes specifically. As Stein (2001) notes, witnesses to the genocide pointed out that women played a role in the killings. He recounts one incident where victims, “had their hands tied behind their back and were rolled down steep cliffs. Women were standing below and they slashed at those who had rolled down with knives until they were dead.” A study by Eliz Sansarian (1989) finds that women were indeed involved as perpetrators, and they often victimized other women. Sansarian describes women beating other women, killing other women, sexually violating other women, and selling other women (and girls) into sexual slavery.

Sansarian went into his study expecting to find women more compassionate than men – he predicted that women would be more likely to be rescuers, or protesters for peace. It turns out, instead, that women were represented in the ranks of the perpetrators, and not
overrepresented in the ranks of the rescuers. Women’s roles in selling other women into sexual slavery were particularly salient in the narratives of the survivors that Sansarian interviewed. In these narratives and in Sansarian’s telling of their stories, women were described as sexually abusing and then selling Armenian women who had been brought into their households (often, ironically, by their husbands for protection) because they were jealous of their husbands’ (imagined or actual) sexual relationships with these women (who were often in their early teen years). Women’s participation in the Armenian genocide, when it is recognized, is often described in terms of their status as jealous housewives, rather than in any terms that would make them either responsible for their violence or comparable to male perpetrators.

**Women’s Motivations for Genocidal Rape and Sex-based Violence**

These stories about women’s participation in genocide and/or genocidal rape tell different tales of different women in different contexts, but they share, as mentioned above, several elements. First, these stories classify women perpetrators of genocide and genocidal rape as separate, different, and often more violent than men who commit similar or the same crimes. In tales of Pauline Nyiramasuhuko, her crimes are framed as especially terrible because she was not only a woman but the minister for women and family affairs. Wight and Myers (1996, xii) explain that a violent woman’s gender is “the primary explanation or mitigating factor offered up in any attempt to understand her crime.” A woman’s “sex is the lens through which all of her actions are seen and understood” when she commits violence (Wight and Myers 1996, xi).

As such, the question of why women commit violence generally and genocide specifically is treated as a different question than the question of why men commit such violence. Women’s violence is often almost exclusively explained by gender-specific theories or gender-specified versions of traditional theories of individual violence. Women’s violence is explained as women’s violence rather than as women committing violence. The mother narrative insinuates that women’s maternal instinct is a gender-specific explanation for women’s violence. The monster narrative implies that the perversion of female psychology is a special, more terrible
cause for violence than the perversion of male psychology. The whore narrative portrays
gender-specific attributes of women’s sexuality as culprits for women’s violence. Several
gender-specific theories of women’s violence attribute it to their status as rape victims, their
jealousy of other women, their loss of hope to get married, their erotomania, and other
attributes seen as unique to (if anomalous in) women (e.g., Bloom 2005; Pape 2005).

In addition to women’s commission of genocide and genocidal rape being distinguished
from men’s commission of similar war crimes, women who commit genocide are distinguished
from other, ‘real,’ women. ‘Real’ or ‘normal’ women are seen as incapable of committing
genocide generally and the sexual violation of women specifically. ‘Real’ women are peaceful,
conservative, virtuous, and restrained; violent women ignore those boundaries of womanhood.
Instead, the women on the pages of this chapter are the enemy from whom others, often
innocent women, need protection. Their stories contradict the dominant narrative about what a
woman is generally and about women’s capacity for violence specifically. Because their stories
do not resonate with these inherited images of femininity, violent women are marginalized in
political discourse. Their choices are rarely seen as choices, and, when they are, they are
characterized as apolitical.

Those with a political interest in the gender order cannot hear or tell those stories of
women’s participation in genocidal rape; instead, stories are produced and reproduced where
women’s agency in their violence is denied and violent women are characterized as singular and
abnormal aberrations. Stories about women’s participation in genocide “become systems of
signification which are productive (or reproductive) of their subject women” specifically and women more generally (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 57). If violent women are
seen as different from what women as women should be, then their existence can be explained
away without interrogating the fundamental problems with the stereotypical understanding of
what women are – peaceful, virtuous, non-violent, etc.
This problem is all the more clear in the treatment of women’s sexual violence against women. If there is anything that women have in common, some assume, it should be reluctance to participate in the very sexual violence that many consider the linchpin of gender subordination. The ideal-typical woman is either asexual or sexually conservative; women who are sexual or use sexuality as violence are to be distinguished from normal women.

Even though women who commit genocide or genocidal rape are framed as aberrations to femininity, they are aberrations not because they have traits that women usually do not, but instead because they are the dangerous result of femininity uncontrolled and taken to extremes. In other words, it is the excesses of femininity blamed for these women’s crimes — women could be genociders and rapists if characteristics associated with femininity are allowed out of control. H. H. A. Cooper wrote that violent women possess an ‘intractable’ and ‘cold rage...that even the most alienated of men seem quite incapable of emulating’ (Cooper 1979, 150). In other words, in these accounts, women’s violence is worse (and to be feared more) than men’s violence, because women are naturally emotional and unpredictable as opposed to men’s presumed rationality and consistency, even in the commission of crimes.

Traits associated exclusively with femininity permeate the snapshots earlier in this chapter. The women who encouraged genocidal rape in Darfur were described as ‘singing’ their support, a trait traditionally associated with femininity but gone terribly wrong in this situation. Biljana Plavsic’s alleged leading role in the genocidal rape in the Republica Srpska is associated with her oedipal attraction to warlords in the conflict. Pauline Nyiramasuhuko’s alleged commands to have women raped and killed are often related to her feminine jealousy, her maternal relationship with her son (a participant in the genocide under her command), and female monstrosity. The women who participated in sexual abuse of prisoners at Nazi concentration camps were framed in much the same way – their feminine desires (to please men, or to decorate their homes) were carried out in extreme ways (by violence and abuse, making lamp shades out of human skin). Women who sold women into sexual slavery in the
Armenian genocide were characterized as doing so, at least in part, to shore up their positions as the only wives in their households. Therefore, though they are a blight on the purity of femininity, women who commit genocidal rape or other sex-based crimes in genocide are described as being motivated by things that could only come from their status as women – what is abnormal to women is not their femininity, it is its uncontrolled status and extreme expression.

Finally, these stories of women’s participation in genocidal rape share that they either argue or imply that women’s perpetration of genocidal rape against women disrupts narratives of female victimhood. El-Basri has argued that the case of Pauline Nyiramasuhuko brings us “the problem of misogyny with a feminine name” (2004). Others have argued that her story demonstrates that women are no longer the victims of armed conflict (Drumbl 2005, 11). Barbara Ehrenreich (2004) has argued, using Abu Ghraib as an example, that women’s participation in sexual violence demonstrates that feminism has worked – that women are now equal to men and do not need to be seen as victims of men’s violence, but instead as potential perpetrators on an equal playing field with men. In other words, there are those who argue that women’s participation in violence signals the end of women’s victimization in war and genocide. Still, many of the women that were discussed in the five snapshots above sexually victimized women on the basis of gender. In other words, they perpetrated gender subordination.

Even if there wasn’t gender subordination in these women’s actions, women’s participation as agents of genocide (or any other political violence) does not necessarily mean that women are not victimized in genocide, or gender-specifically by genocidal rape. Instead, the media and academic community’s difficulties in reacting to and understanding women’s participation in sexual violence related to genocide demonstrate a need to reevaluate our understandings of what women are (and what they are capable of), the meaning of gender subordination, and our understandings of and laws about violence.

A Reformulated Approach to Genocidal Rape
Women’s commission of genocidal rape invites a reconsideration of our understandings of gender roles. The shock and surprise of women’s involvement in such crimes comes in part from the inherited notions that women are incapable of violence and in part from the expectation that, even were women capable of violence, the last realm of violence that they would enter is the realm which combines gender subordination and cultural extermination. While there are so many realms in which we’ve come to see women as equally capable with men (e.g., intellectual capacity, certain workplaces), the realm of (personal or political violence) is one where many people still see women as less capable than men. While there are those who would argue that such a conclusion would be (normatively, at least) a good thing, the women in this chapter prove that (at least in their individual lives), no stereotype could be further from the truth.

Stories of women’s participation in genocide show that narratives about women’s violence are often fraught with gender stereotypes and negative sensationalizations of femininity. They are, for that reason, inaccurate and gender-subordinating as they apply to empirical observations of women’s behavior, which includes participating in genocide and genocidal rape. This is not to say that men and women do not commit their violence in a gendered world with a number of gendered influences and gendered implications. Instead, it is to say that we should think twice when we assume women’s participation in genocide and/or genocidal rape is unnatural or anomalous.

Discovering that women commit (sexual) violence in war and genocide tells us that the stereotype that women are necessarily more peaceful than men is not an accurate one. As such, it invites a reconsideration of what it means to be a woman – if not to (necessarily) have characteristics traditionally associated with femininity. Womanhood, if not bound by essential social characteristics, can be read as bound by living in a world defined by gender expectations and gender stereotypes. Gender is a set of discourses that set, shape, and define social and political life based on perceived membership in social classes. Being gendered female, then, as
Catherine MacKinnon (1994) explained, is a subordination that can happen to anyone – it is only that we assume that it is natural for it to happen to those people we understand as women.

Along with the implied naturalness of women’s subordination and the assumption of women’s incapability, we can see in the stereotyped reactions to women’s commission of sexual violence not only that women are expected not to violate other women – but also that there’s some normalness to men’s sexual violation of women. While rape generally and genocidal rape specifically are subject to some sense of taboo, the increased sensationalization of women’s participation in genocidal rape demonstrates that there is some sense in which men sexually victimizing women has come to be expected, or can be seen as business as usual. These realizations invite a re-evaluation of our understandings of gender subordination.

Lori Girshick, writing about woman-on-woman domestic violence, explains that “that same-sex abuse between women exist does not mean that we have to throw out our feminist analysis of rape and battering, However, seeing a framework where male privilege is just one aspect of the broader hierarchical power-over is more useful” (2002). The reason that women’s violence seems so impossible to understand with gender subordination is that we have an oversimplified understanding of what gender subordination is. Women’s violence seems to end or change gender subordination because and only because we understand gender subordination as something that all men do to all women. While feminist theory has been trying to complicate these ideas by highlighting differences between women and demonstrating that gendering is something that happens both to men and women, observations of and narratives about women’s subordination of women ask us to articulate a more sophisticated understanding of gender subordination.

First, gender subordination is based on perceived membership in and relationship with, rather than some sort of absolute and actual membership in, sex classes. There is not just one femininity and one masculinity. Instead, there are ideal-types of masculinity and femininity based on class, culture, religion, race, ethnicity, and time – and other masculinities and
femininities related to those ideal-types. Those multiple masculinities and femininities come together to set boundaries for what women should be and what men should be, situated in the sociocultural contexts. These boundaries provide the content of perceived membership in sex classes.

Second, the impact of perceived membership in and relationship with sex classes only exists because gender subordination is fundamentally a power relationship – where those perceived as female/feminine are made less powerful than those perceived as masculine/male. This power relationship extends through the perceived possession of gendered traits, and the gendering of perceived behaviors and actions. A woman who commits sexual violence, then, is seen as at once “not a normal woman” in terms of her disassociation with traditional feminine behavior and “femininity out of control” because that discourse can be at once disempowering and othering. Gender subordination, then, is not something men do to women or women do to women, but the result of a systemic discursive framework of expectations and power relationships based on perceived membership in sex categories. As such, women can be (and are) perpetrators of a crime that disempowers and subjugates women (individually and as a class). Women’s participation in genocide and genocidal rape does not negate the gendered impacts of genocide and genocidal rape.

The third step, then, is to reformulate international legal approaches to genocidal rape to accommodate the possibility of women perpetrators while still preserving the understanding that women are, as a class, victimized by genocidal rape based on gender. As Girshick (2002) explains, “the law presumes heterosexuality, and assumes a female victim and a male perpetrator.” While the law does not explicitly label men as perpetrators, the frequent identification of women as victims sets up a presumed opposition with men as perpetrators – the implication is that, if women as women are victims, then men (as men) are the persons doing the victimizing. The realization that women as women can victimize women as women

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(which is much more commonly accepted in everyday life than in genocide) offers the law two directions in terms of reformulation.

First, the law can change the assumed gender of the perpetrator by adopting a more nuanced understanding of gender subordination – maintaining the focus of the gendered impact of genocidal rape while making it clear that women can, and do, participate in it and should, and will, be punished for that participation. Second, our understandings of what genocidal rape is can change with the realization that women can and do participate in it. Instead of trying to add or fit women to theories, the terms of which were set before women’s violence was considered, we could see the international law of genocidal rape understand the phenomenon of perpetration as if women as both perpetrators and victims mattered in theoretical formulation.

Perhaps feminist theory can lend a hand here. One of the primary concerns of feminist theory is the reconciliation of women’s lives and masculinist interpretation of key concepts like interpersonal relations, the state, and the international system. The women in this chapter committed proscribed violence – specifically genocide and genocidal rape. Feminist theory asks why women are systematically exclude from explanations for individual (sexual) violence. Women are not usually present in these theories, and when they are, one of two discursively exclusive moves are made. First, women are included in a theory that defines individual violence in reference to masculine standards of individual conduct. More often, though, women are included but gender differentiated in these theories of individual violence.

In Mothers, Monsters, and Whores, we argued that a relational autonomy framework provides a basis for us to move beyond these problems. According to a feminist understanding of relational autonomy, human choice is never entirely free, but it is also never entirely constrained. Thus, the radical denial of agency in the mother, monster, and whore narratives is both gendered and unwarranted, but the (masculine) rational choice theory (or psychoanalytic or frustration-aggression) at the other end of the spectrum is also an incomplete explanation.
Any move towards a gender-conscious theory of women’s (or men’s) perpetration of genocide would need to at once account for political and social motivations, gendered context and individuality. Including previously hidden gender inequalities in the analysis of individual violence in global politics ‘allows us to see how many of the insecurities affecting us all, women and men alike, are gendered in this historical origins, their conventional definitions, and their contemporary manifestations’ (Tickner 1992, 129). Recognizing that women sometimes commit genocide and genocidal rape, this perspective argues, (or ‘adding women’) is insufficient.

Instead, the problem will not be fixed until we reach a point where both the people and values associated with femininity are ‘more universally valued in public life’ and women’s agency in their decisions is as recognized as men’s agency in theirs’ (Tickner 1992, 141). The beginning of this re-visioning is gendered lenses’ recognition of human interdependence and relational autonomy, which shows that all decisions are contextual and contingent, not only women’s, and all decisions are made, not only men’s.

Feminist theory provides a way forward for the creation of such an understanding of individual violence in global politics. Kathy Ferguson explains that ‘praxis feminisms focus on affirmative intersubjective connections between persons rather than on autonomous or combative selves,’ which would cause them to suggest that individual violence be discussed in relational, rather than abstract, terms (1993, 69). An intersubjective theory of individual violence in global politics would account for both context and individual choice, both personal and political.

This could be operationalized in legal terms by a description of gender subordination as a socially fluid but system force of discrimination on the basis of perceived membership in categories inscribed with gendered power, and an understanding that human perpetration and victimization exist in a world where there is both relational autonomy (incomplete independence) and unequal power (gender subordination). As such, women (individually and
collectively) can be seen as victims of women’s perpetration of genocidal rape, while women (individually and collectively) are not robbed of agency by their classification as victims.

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1 See, for example, the work of Adam Jones (2002) and (2004).

2 Initially, each search got around 20,000 hits; these fade off of search engines as they get older.

3 e.g., the work of Chandra Mohanty (1988) and (2003)

4 e.g., Zalewski and Parpart (1998); Hooper (2001)
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