

Review of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence: International Law, Local Responses by Susan Dewey and Tonia St Germain, Eds., Kumarian Press, 2012.

Olivera Simić

Lecturer, Griffith Law School, Griffith University, Australia

The issue of wartime sexual violence has received abundant attention in recent years, due, most significantly, to the impact of the armed conflicts on civilian populations from the 1990s to the present day. As a result, the UN Security Council now recognises that sexual violence is used “systematically” as a tactic of war and that women in conflict zones need protection from such violence. While the contributors to *Conflict-Related Sexual Violence: International Law, Local Responses* emphatically agree that the protection is necessary, they warn us that either there is “a major deficit” (Medie, p. 99) in the implementation of such protection or that, as Sparling argues, responses to women’s abuses remain focused on “infantilizing initiatives of protection” (p. 34). The common thread tying together all chapters in the volume is the claim that women should be perceived not only as victims of war in need of protection, but as agents too.

The fact that contributors to the volume come from diverse scholarly fields makes this book a truly interdisciplinary undertaking—valuable in its varied and original perspectives on the issue of wartime rape. There are international human rights lawyers, legal theorists, political scientists, anthropologists, mental health professionals, and activists whose work comes “from world of scholarly research and everyday practice” (p. 11). The book deals with the conflict-related sexual violence in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, Haiti, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and South Africa. The contributors in this volume are deeply passionate about the post-conflict gender justice as they seek to address the implications of international responses to conflict-related sexual violence through their analyses of the gaps between policy and practice with respect to efforts to reduce or respond to conflict-related sexual violence made by international organisations, criminal courts and tribunals.

The contributors to this volume address a far-ranging set of questions, and among others: they tackle legal definitions and terminology used to describe sexual violence; obstacles that women face on their way to achieving justice; prosecutorial strategies; and post-war recovery from violence. They also expose and provide an important critique of the role of retributive justice and criminal punishment as the ultimate solution to sexual violence. Moreover, while the experiences of women who survived the conflict have been increasingly incorporated into the agendas of national governments and international law, the contributors closely interrogate legal “successes” in combating wartime sexual violence claimed by some feminists to be achieved on the international stage.

The book is divided into three parts. Each part offers a rich interdisciplinary analysis of a specific issue. Part One, “Rhetoric and Discourses”, analysis legal rhetoric of international law and the disjuncture between its theoretical frameworks and the way it is practiced. Two chapters in this part provide a complex analysis of legal language, which either excludes women (Chapt. 2) or reduces them to passive victims (Chapt. 3). Four chapters in Part Two, “International Criminal Justice”, focus their attention on the masculine nature of the international initiatives to end conflict-related sexual violence: by focusing on the protection of victim/survivor, such initiatives render perpetrators invisible. The three chapters in Part Three, “Conflict-Related Sexual Violence and Its Aftermath”, focus on the complex role men play in conflict-related sexual violence.

In sum, *Conflict-Related Sexual Violence: International Law, Local Responses* aims to address a lack of “accessible work on the initiatives and institutions currently tackling sexual violence” (p. 2). Many contributors in the volume argue that international legal system needs to move away from the Western dogmatic “monologue model” (p. 9) and engage in a cross-cultural dialogue. Situated between scholarly analysis and an empirical exploration of the work on the ground, the volume makes a great addition to the growing body of literature on sexual violence in wartime and its aftermath. Written in plain and accessible language, this book will be an invaluable resource tool for activists, policy makers, scholars and students in gender studies, law, peace and conflict studies, international relations, politics, anthropology and psychology.