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Gender and genocide in Rwanda: women as agents and objects of genocide¹

LISA SHARLACH

If there is any necessary connection between women and peace it is certainly not immutable, since women can and do fight, take up arms, kill, torture, brutalize and subjugate other human beings, including children. (Carroll, 1987, p 15)

There were some women who were very active in the genocide. ... This shows that every time the woman is not a, not peaceful, like we think in our society. In the genocide, when the woman was not able to kill you, they refused you to go in the house. It was the—Every time, it was the woman who refused other women to be in her house. If the husband accepted to put you in the house, the women refused. If you are going in the bush, near the—they call the militia and say, “She is here.” Women had a great role in the genocide here in Rwanda. (Interview with Chantal Kayitesi, November 10, 1998)

Women were vastly under-represented in politics in pre-1994 Rwanda, but nevertheless they were among the political elite most responsible for the genocide. What was known as the “little house”—the handful who plotted the Rwandan genocide—included two of Rwanda’s most prominent women, President Habyalimana’s wife Agathe and the Minister of the Family and Promotion of Women. The “little house” wanted to ensure the impunity of those who perpetrated the genocide (Lemarchand, 1997, p 413). To this end, they encouraged the involvement in the massacres of as much of the country as possible, including women and girls. The Rwandan army and the Hutu militia known as the *Interahamwe* (“those who fight together”), with the help of the civilians, in less than the space of three months killed over a million and mutilated thousands more (Layika, 1995, p 38). Because the weapons of genocide in this impoverished country were machetes and nail-studded clubs, there were usually several killers for each victim (Berkeley, 1998, p 26).

Especially after mid-May, the leaders ordered the *Interahamwe* not to spare Tutsi women and children (Nowrojee, 1996, p 41). Hundreds of thousands of Tutsi females (and some Hutu women who associated with Tutsi or had married into Tutsi families) died in 1994. Those who lived usually suffered some form of violence, whether sexual or not. Rapes of Tutsi girls and women took place in every part of Rwanda between April 6 and July 12, 1994 (Bonnet, 1995, p 19).² Some of the rape victims were Hutu, attacked either because of their

association with Tutsi or because they had the misfortune to be in the wrong place at the wrong time (Nowrojee, 1996, p 41).

Feminists are creating a body of literature on violations of women's human rights that explores how girls and women are increasingly the casualties of war (see Elshtain, 1987; Vickers, 1993; Bennett *et al.*, 1995; Lentin, 1997; Twagiramariya and Turshen, 1998). The mass rapes and other forms of human rights violations of Tutsi females fit tidily within our schema of women as victims of patriarchal militarism. The involvement of so many women in perpetrating genocide and other human rights violations, however, is more difficult to explain. Perhaps we forget that women have been warriors at least since Homer's day, when a few mothers raised daughters from birth to be Amazons (Newark, 1989, p 12). European explorers reported that in the South American jungles they encountered armies of women (Newark, 1989, p 40); women in Dahomey worked alongside men as professional slave raiders (Newark, 1989, p 44). Few today are aware that the fight for US and Western European women's suffrage was not a peaceful one. Literally militant suffragettes, such as the English Emmeline Pankhurst, maintained that women must wage civil war in order to win the rights of citizenship (1972 [1913], p 297).

Women continue to inflict political violence in contemporary times, although the numbers of such women are small (Bennett *et al.*, 1995, p 7). A handful of feminist scholars today, particularly those with political leanings far to the left, address (and perhaps glamorize) women's role in violent resistance to the coercive apparatus of the state. Examples include women's ranks in the resistance movements, such as the Shining Path, against the military government in Peru (Andreas, 1985) or women's participation in the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa (Bernstein, 1985; Lipman, 1984; Russell, 1991). Olivia Bennett notes that a striking feature of the interviews that she and other researchers conducted of women's experience of combat in 12 post-conflict nations was how often the interviewees asserted that women in combat were more vicious than men (1995, p 6).

Nevertheless, few feminists (or, for that matter, non-feminists) have explored the role of women in *perpetrating* human rights violations, such as during the genocide in 1994 in Rwanda. We have yet to examine fully the implications for feminist theory of catastrophes such as Rwanda in which women are both victims and villains. In 1994 Rwanda, a woman's loyalty to her ethnic group almost always overrode any sense of sisterhood to women of the other major ethnic group. The case of the Rwandan genocide underscores the need for practitioners of women's studies not to overlook ethnic politics when examining violence against women.

This article, examines the discourse on women and violence in contemporary Western feminist theory. I focus particularly on the all-too-familiar debate whether any connection between being female and being a pacifist is the result of nature or nurture. I also present critiques of this debate by Carol Lee Bacchi (1990) and Judith Butler (1993). Next, I give a brief overview of social inequality, both ethnic and gender, in Rwanda. I then outline the roles of Hutu

women as perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide, and (overwhelmingly but not exclusively) Tutsi women as victims of this violence, which often took a sexualized form. Finally, I assess how well each of the feminist perspectives on women and violence fits the case of the 1994 civil war in Rwanda.

Implications for feminist theory

The case of Rwanda disrupts the common assumption of Western feminists and anti-feminists alike that women are less likely to engage in political violence than are men. Through the 1980s, the Western discourse on women and violence was divided into the essentialist camp (who believe women are by nature the gentler sex) and the constructivists (who believe that if women are indeed gentler, this difference is due to nurture rather than nature). Essentialist feminists posit that men are inherently more warlike than are women. According to the essentialist argument, women, by virtue of their maternal capacity, possess a sense of interconnectedness with others and an instinct to protect life. These characteristics lead women to have an aversion to war (Elshtain, 1983, p 345). Maternalist pacifism, they argue, is not to be confused with weakness or cowardice. Essentialists believe that the wars we have suffered are the result of male-dominated political and military systems. The world would be more peaceful if it were women making policy, or "reweaving the web of life" (McAllister, 1982). Essentialists feel that transforming the militaristic society to a maternalistic society requires the abolition of masculine characteristics such as individualism and competitiveness, and the affirmation of previously denigrated feminine characteristics such as compassion and gentleness.

Constructivists do not believe that women are inherently more pacific than are men: they explain sexual difference as the result of socialization (see, for example, Reardon, 1985, p 8). Constructivists include both rights feminists, whose goal is equal rights for women, and post-modern feminists, who believe that sex itself is a social construction. Constructivists charge that essentialists hurt feminist movements by reinforcing the sexist stereotype of woman as the weaker vessel. Some constructivists *are* pacifists, but they do not believe that pacifism necessarily correlates with being a woman (Carroll, 1987, p 15). Indeed, they perceive the essentialist argument to be flawed because it implies that only women are pacifists, or that peace is only in women's interest (Richards, 1990, p 219). For constructivists, the objective is equal opportunity for women and not the restructuring of social values. Countering militarism should be on the agenda of peace movements, not feminist movements (Richards, 1990, p 224).

Carol Lee Bacchi, in *Same Difference: Feminism and Sexual Difference* (1990), stresses that it is time to move past the tired essentialist versus constructivist debate. She writes:

(W)hen feminists resort to arguments about women's "sameness" or "difference," the real problem is that society caters inadequately for living arrangements and human needs

generally [1990, pp 262–263] ... the sameness/difference framework does feminism a disservice since it mystifies these political issues. And so we would be well advised to avoid describing the movement in these terms. It is far preferable to discuss openly strategies and political visions than to create the impression, first, that the problem is whether or not women are like men and, second, that women must (or can) choose either to replicate contemporary male lifestyles and values or take responsibility for the world's caring work. (1990, p 265)

Applying Bacchi's perception of gender difference to the topic of women and war, then, feminists should leave to the philosophers the question of whether men or women are more warlike. The significant issues for feminists are, first, the devastation that war brings upon the bodies and the lives of people of both sexes, and second, the fact that military violence often affects the sexes in gender-specific ways.

Judith Butler, in *Bodies that Matter*, takes a different approach to the essentialist–constructivist stalemate. Butler writes, “(t)he debate between constructivism and essentialism thus misses the point of deconstruction altogether” (1993, p 8). The most radical versions of the constructivist argument—that sex itself is a social construction—can seem exasperating because the proponents of this stance seem to defy our own observations that men and women have a few different anatomical features and biological functions (1993, p 10). Butler writes:

What I would propose in place of these conceptions of construction is a return to the notion of matter, not as site or surface, but as a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter. ... Crucially, then, construction is neither a single act nor a causal process initiated by a subject and culminating in a set of fixed effects. Construction not only takes place in time, but is itself a temporal process which operates through the reiteration of norms; sex is both produced and destabilized in the course of this reiteration. (1993, pp 9–10)

People live in bodies with different sexual and racial markings, and societies attach social meanings to these markings that we in turn learn to “perform.”

It is important to note that the participants in this discussion are from Europe and North America, even though the subject—on the meaning of sex identity—is universal. Some women of color in the USA have challenged Western feminist academics to let go of the tendency to superimpose our own subjective experience—such as being a white, middle-class woman—over the experience of all women. For example, Paula Gunn Allen writes

The older I get the more I notice the great difference between my notions of what constitutes femininity and masculinity and the white world's notions about it. Every time I read a sentence that goes “women (do, say, think, feel)” or “men (do, say, think, feel)” I always ask, however silently, *which* women? *Which* men? For, frankly, none of the men and women I grew up with did any of the described behaviors, or they did some but not the others, or did entirely undescribed ones. (1995, p 42)

Similarly, Obioma Nnaemeka writes that an important issue for African feminists is the objection “to the universalization of Western notions and concepts” (1998, p 8). An example she gives is the assumption of Western

feminists that our definition of sexual harassment applies to all other societies. A touch decried as harassment in the West may be friendly inter-personal contact in an African village (1998, 8).

Finally, of course, most women in Sub-Saharan Africa are by necessity more concerned with pressing matters such as survival than with ruminations on whether sex is or is not a social construction. To a Rwandan head-of-household, trying to raise enough food for her own children and her late brother's while battling HIV and post-war trauma, how relevant is the essentialist–constructivist debate?

Background to the genocide

Ethnicity in Rwanda

Before the genocide erupted in 1994, the Hutu comprised 85 percent of Rwanda's population, the Tutsi comprised 14 percent and the Batwa, the pygmies who were the first inhabitants of Rwanda, comprised 1 percent (US Department of State, 1997, p 6; Dorsey, 1994, p 6). The Hutu rebelled against the elite, the Tutsi, in 1959 and took control of Rwanda by 1960. Many of the Tutsi fled to other countries. Through the next decades, those Tutsi in exile periodically attempted to return to Rwanda. Each time, this attempt resulted in Hutu massacres of those Tutsi in Rwanda. In 1990, the Tutsi exile army, the RPF, invaded Rwanda, but French and Belgian troops helped the government to drive them out before they could capture Kigali (Vassall-Adams, 1994, p 21). The Arusha Accords of 1993 offered ethnic reconciliation, which would entail the weakening of the ruling Hutu parties. At this point, the Hutu leaders began drawing up the plans for genocide of the Tutsi (Destexhe, 1995, p 29).

Status of women

Rwandan women are disadvantaged in all arenas—the family, education, the law, politics, and commerce. The Family Code of 1992 officially designates husbands as the heads of households. Tradition deems that women cannot inherit property, and no laws guarantee women the right to inherit (US Department of State, 1997, p 5). A married Rwandan woman needs the consent of her husband to open a bank account, engage in commerce, or enter into any agreement (although Rwandans frequently ignore these laws). If a Rwandan woman marries a foreign man, she (and her children) lose Rwandan citizenship (Karake, 1998).

Before the genocide, women had little involvement in governing Rwanda. In 1984, women formed zero percent of the government policy-making apparatus (Small, 1998). There were no women in the executive branch until 1990, and then women comprised only 5 percent. Women never filled more than 17 percent of the seats in parliament. Not until 1990 was a woman in a ministerial position (Nowrojee, 1996, p 21). Before the genocide, there were no female mayors or prefects. Of sub-prefects, 3.2 percent were women (Nowrojee, 1996, p 22).

The genocide

Women as villains

Few in the West realize the extent to which women participated in the Rwandan genocide. Most of the women killers were Hutu; however, girls and women fought in the Tutsi resistance (African Rights, 1998a, p 5). Some Tutsi women married to Hutu men were also complicit in the genocide (African Rights, 1996, p 96).

For the preponderance of Hutu women in Rwanda, Hutu nationalism overrode any sense of sisterhood with Tutsi women. Tutsi mothers believed that Hutu mothers would help them shield their children. One genocide survivor told me that when the violence broke out, many of the Tutsi women left their children under the protection of Hutu mothers nearby. However, the Hutu women turned the Tutsi children over to the *Interahamwe* to kill (interview with representative of Pro-Femmes, November 13, 1998).

Even though there were few women in Rwanda's political and military structures before 1994, women were, as noted, among the core group that plotted the genocide. The infamous *Milles Collines* Radio Station was the primary arm through which the government disseminated first, anti-Tutsi propaganda, and during mid-1994, instructions on how to hunt and kill Tutsi. Some of the most racist *Milles Collines* broadcasters were women (African Rights, 1995, p 148). A few women were town councilors and, according to African Rights, they were especially vicious (1995, p 110). Women who organized the genocide ordered the deaths of Tutsi girls and watched them be raped first. However, it does not appear that women actually instructed soldiers to rape (African Rights, 1995, p 82).

Hutu women from all walks of Rwandan life participated in the killing. In Kibuye, the militia mobilized the local prostitutes to kill children (African Rights, 1995, p 214). Rwandan nuns refused to harbor refugees, turned them over to the militia, provided lists of those yet to be killed, and even participated in the killings themselves (African Rights, 1995, pp 155–165). Some Hutu female medical personnel became killers, too (African Rights, 1995, p 208). Schoolgirls killed their classmates (African Rights, 1995, p 67).

One survivor told me:

When Pro-Femmes and all the beautiful women's organizations are saying, 'The future of Rwanda is women.' Ah, no, it is not, this is just a joke. ... During the genocide, it was horrible. You had women who were killing like men. But also what they were doing was horrible, they were hunting, telling where people were hiding, or going, taking clothes or jewelry from the bodies. Also, what I found was very, very hard, if the women had been in solidarity and organized hiding, then there [would have been] a way. But they didn't even help to hide. (AVEGA widow, November 10, 1998)

Victor Karega of the Rwandan Ministry of Gender, Family, and Social Affairs, comments:

(I)n our culture, woman has been always a symbol. A symbol of maternity, a symbol of

love. It was a symbol of social cohabitation. Even when there were problems, ethnic problems and political problems, women were always like a link, a linkage, between different categories of people, because they were marrying from, or to, both sides.

But during the genocide, they were also involved in perpetrating the genocide. But we understand that to some extent. Because the genocide that occurred in Rwanda was planned and organized by the national machinery, it was the government, so it was somehow as a duty, to the people who believed in that government, to implement. That's how they came to kill, these women. (Interview of November 13, 1998)

Some of the Hutu leaders who continue the campaign of terror against Tutsi survivors (and against those moderate Hutu whom they fear might incriminate them) are women (African Rights, 1996, p 104). Hutu extremist women in the northwest continue to promote the Hutu Power campaign by gathering information, caring for the militia members, serving as spirit mediums, and killing (African Rights, 1998b, p 6).

Women as victims

Many hundreds of thousands of women and girls died in the genocide, although men comprised more of the casualties than women. Most of the casualties were not adults, but children (Beauchemin, 1995). Any Tutsi woman who survived was likely to have been raped (Layika, 1995, p 39). The UN's Special Rapporteur on Rwanda, multiplying the 2,000–5,000 pregnancies caused by rape based on the probability that an act of rape would result in conception one time in every hundred, estimates that there were between 250,000 and 500,000 rapes (cited in Nowrojee, 1996, p 24). A widowed rape survivor explains:

Now, AVEGA [Association of Widows of the April Genocide] is conducting a study. To see—there is a very bad joke around that any woman who has survived, has been raped. Although it is a bad joke, it seems that a big proportion of those who survived, most of the time, it was because of an act of—it is because we were raped. And the person who raped, took you and said that you are the wife after he raped you. But most of the time they killed the whole family. (Interview of November 10, 1998)

These rapes took place five years ago, but the survivors still suffer from the aftermath. The most common problems they face are: the dilemma of whether to disclose the rape; continued sexual victimization; medical conditions such as injuries, HIV infection (according to a clinic that treats rape survivors, over half are HIV-positive (interview of November 11, 1998); illegal abortion, pregnancy; and psychological problems (Bonnet, 1995, pp 22–24; Nowrojee, 1996, p 73; UNHCHR, 1998, pp 36–37; Flanders, 1998, p 29; Schwartz, 1998, pp 1–2). Poverty is common among the rape survivors, as most of those who are Tutsi lost their husband and other male family members, cannot inherit under Rwandan law because of their sex, and may be too traumatized to earn a living (US Department of State, 1997, p 69).

The Rwandan government set the stage for the mass rapes during the genocide by disseminating propaganda through the media, simultaneously denigrating and

sexualizing Tutsi women (UNHCHR, 1998, p 17). Genocide survivor Chantal Kayitesi explains:

The media was used to prepare society. They made up the commandments, the commandments of the Hutu. "The Tutsi woman is bad, the Tutsi woman is a prostitute, the Tutsi woman is an informant/spy." All this, all this propaganda, was on the radio and the TV. It led to many sentiments against the Tutsi women, that one should kill them, that if the Tutsi woman married a Hutu, the kids, even, should be killed. It was the media campaign that prepared the genocide. (Interview of November 10, 1998)

The *Kangura* ("Wake Up!") journal on December 10, 1990, published the "Ten Bahutu Commandments," three of which concerned Tutsi women:

1. "Every Muhutu should know that a Mututsi woman, wherever she is, works for the interest of the Tutsi ethnic group. As a result, we shall consider a traitor any Muhutu who:
—marries a Tutsi woman
—befriends a Tutsi woman
—employs a Tutsi woman as a secretary or concubine."
2. "Every Muhutu should know that our Hutu daughters are more suitable and conscientious in their role as woman, wife and mother of the family. Are they not beautiful, good secretaries and more honest?"
3. "Bahutu women, be vigilant and try to bring your husbands, brothers and sons back to reason." (Cited in UNHCHR, 1998, pp 11–12)

Binaifir Nowrojee, a Kenyan working for the Women's Rights Project of Human Rights Watch, includes many narratives from rape survivors in her study of sexual violence in Rwanda, *Shattered Lives* (1996). Most survivors of the rapes during genocide report that attackers mentioned their ethnicity before or during the rape: " 'You Tutsi women are too proud;' 'We want to see how sweet Tutsi women are;' 'You Tutsi women think you are too good for us;' 'We want to see if a Tutsi woman is like a Hutu woman;' and 'If there were peace, you would never accept me' " (in Nowrojee, 1996, p 18). "Perpetue" remembers, "Before he raped me, he said that he wanted to check if Tutsi women were like other women before he took me back to the church to be burnt" (in Nowrojee, 1996, p 43). One woman's assailants told her, "We thought Tutsi women were different, but we found they are just the same" (in Nowrojee, 1996, p 51).

Witnesses who testified before the ICTR (the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda) in Arusha in the trial of Jean-Paul Akayesu, the mayor of Taba Commune, report that he incited his subordinates to rape. He told them, "Never again ask me what a Tutsi woman tastes like" (Berkeley, 1998, p 12). The pre-existing stereotypes and ethnic jealousies, exacerbated by the government propaganda campaign denigrating and sexualizing Tutsi women, created a climate in which the mass rape of Tutsi women appeared to be an appropriate form of retribution for their purported arrogance, immorality, hyper-sexuality, and espionage.

When the genocide commenced, even the most respected men in the community raped. Rapists included not just soldiers and peasants, but educated men,

teachers, and priests (African Rights, 1995, pp 68, 82–83). Most often, the military simply encouraged rape by others (Nowrojee, 1996, p 49). Sometimes the government soldiers raped as well (Nowrojee, 1996, p 49). The Hutu militia and army are responsible for the preponderance, but not the entirety, of the rapes in 1994. Dr. Bonnet writes that when the RPF (the Rwandan Patriotic Front, the Tutsi-led army) invaded in June of 1994, they perpetrated retaliatory rapes. She adds that some RPF soldiers, upon their return, captured women and called them wives, even though there was no marriage ceremony (1995, p 25). In addition, it appears that the law enforcement officers violated some female genocide suspects (UNHCHR, 1998, p 44).

Clotilde Twarigamariya and Meredith Turshen write that the rape victims in Rwanda were targeted more on the basis of gender than ethnicity; they add that men of both sides raped (1998, pp 102–103). Of the Tutsi army, they write: “RPF soldiers know no bounds, they respect no limits” (1998, p 106). They cite the former chief of the Rwandan information service and give several pages of descriptions of rapes and other forms of sexualized violence and sadism perpetrated by the RPF (1998, pp 105–107). However, the London-based human rights organization, African Rights, discredits Clotilde Twarigamariya’s previous work on the subject as either misinformed or propaganda intended to depict her own ethnic group, the Hutus, in a favorable light.

The Hutu militia set out in groups of six or eight with a list of individuals to rape, torture, and kill (Bonnet, 1995, p 21). Dr. Bonnet places the 1994 rapes in the following categories: mock marriages; rape that accompanied killing; and rape as reward.

“Marriage”

Hutu extremists raped women during the mass arrests because they were Tutsi, because they were opposed to the regime, or because they were prominent and annoyed the leaders (Bonnet, 1995, p 19). They then distributed the women to soldiers or militia (Bonnet, 1995, p 19). Usually the woman became the “wife” of one of the men who had killed her family members (interview with Chantal Kayitesi, AVEGA, November 10, 1998). Rwandans referred to the captured women as “wives of soldiers” or “wives of the ceiling” because some Hutu men, to keep their hostage from being killed by the other *Interahamwe*, hid her in the space between the ceiling and the roof (Bonnet, 1995, p 19). Dr. Bonnet believes that the Rwandans use the term “marriage” for what was actually sexual slavery in order to let the survivors save face by avoiding the stigma in Rwanda associated with rape (1995, p 19).

Rape as genocide

The second form of rape in Rwandan civil war was rape as genocide. These rapes accompanied sexual humiliation, mutilation, and torture (Bonnet, 1995, p 20). The mere extermination of Tutsi was insufficient; the *Interahamwe* inflicted

upon the Tutsi every imaginable act of sadism, including rape, before killing them. Rape was a means of torture that preceded murder. Often gangs of 10–20 men raped one woman, and some of the women were raped to death (interview with Chantal Kayitesi, AVEGA, November 10, 1998). The militia killed women in gruesome ways, stabbing them through the genitals to the sternum or splitting them in half with a hatchet (Bonnet, 1995, p 21). They sliced pregnant women open and tore out the fetus (interview with Chantal Kayitesi, November 10, 1998). There are numerous accounts of rapes of women already dead. Often the *Interahamwe* would further desecrate the corpse of a raped woman by stripping her and leaving the legs open (Nowrojee, 1996, p 40; Bonnet, 1995, p 21).

Some of the *Interahamwe* refused to kill the women they raped because they believed that for a woman to live with the physical and psychological scars would be worse for her. The militia made some women murder their own children before or after being raped. Survivors may have suffered rape repeatedly when fleeing and hiding during the genocide; others were confined and raped (Nowrojee, 1996, pp 39, 42). Men who knew they carried the HIV virus raped Tutsi women and let them go to inflict a delayed death (Bonnet, 1995, p 20).

Rape as reward

The third form of rape in 1994 took place during raids of homes of Tutsi or those Hutu believed to be traitors. Soldiers or militia captured women, looted, and destroyed the houses. These abducted women would serve as forced prostitutes to the soldiers; others were taken off to the refugee camps in neighboring countries and, Dr. Bonnet reported some months later, were still there (1995, p 20). One rape survivor comments: "I think they [the soldiers] thought it was their *recompense*. For those who had done well. For if you were the head of the mob, it was up to you to choose who you'd rape" (interview of November 10, 1998).

Lessons of women's experiences in Rwanda, 1994

The rapes in Rwanda follow a similar pattern to the rapes that were and continue to be part of the ethnic cleansing campaign in the Balkans. In both instances, nationalist militias waged ethnic conflict against women's bodies. The mass rapes of women in Rwanda took place on a much greater scale than the rapes in Bosnia-Herzegovina or Kosovo, but for whatever reason have received only a fraction of the attention from either the media or feminist academics. The Hutu men's violation of Tutsi girls and women provides more fodder for the existing Western feminist studies of women and war, which tend to focus on abuses of women's human rights.

The participation of so many Hutu women in the 1994 killings in Rwanda lends little support, however, to the essentialist stance that women are innately pacific. That women who were themselves mothers killed or abetted in the murders of the children of their neighbors casts doubt upon the notion that

women, by nature of their capacity to be mothers, have a natural instinct to protect human life.

Yet the role of women in the Rwandan violence does not provide especially good evidence for the constructivist argument either. Many constructivists believe that it is sex-role socialization that explains the “gender gap,” or the fact that US public opinion polls indicate that women are less likely to support the use of military force. A problem in applying to Rwanda the theory of gender difference as the result of sex-role socialization is that, as Victor Karega explains, Rwandan society does valorize woman as a symbol of caring, peace, and even inter-ethnic reconciliation (interview of November 12, 1998). Why, then, if sex-role socialization is so important, and if Rwandan women were socialized to be nurturing and conciliatory, did Rwandan Hutu women become murderers of Tutsi, and particularly Tutsi children?

Perhaps the best, although still not entirely satisfactory, framework for understanding the involvement of women in the Rwandan genocide is Judith Butler’s understanding of sex as socio-cultural meaning inscribed in the body. Bodies are marked not only sexually, but often ethnically as well. (One can sometimes, but not always, distinguish between a Hutu and a Tutsi by height, body frame, the shape of the nose, and the length of the fingers. One’s ethnic heritage was also stamped on the identity cards that pre-1994 Rwandans were required to carry.)

The meanings of bodily markers may change temporally or contextually. In pre-1994 Rwandan society, those living in bodies marked as female were deemed to be particularly peaceful, maternal, and empathetic, and females learned to perform this role. However, the socio-political changes in Rwandan society in the early 1990s—and particularly, the threat that the Hutu majority feared from the Tutsi in exile and in Rwanda—led to the society placing a much greater emphasis on the salience of the marker of ethnicity than of sex. The nationalist radio broadcasters stressed that all Hutu, whether female or male, capable of killing Tutsi had the civic obligation of doing so. As one widowed survivor told me:

People like elders! Elders were killing as well! Women were killing! Children were hunting people with their hands! Even priests! Doctors! Nurses! Veterans! You see, the fact is, what happened is incredible. (Interview of November 10, 1998)

Additionally, the broadcasters demanded that *all Tutsi*, regardless of sex or age, must die. The survivor I cite above remembers:

All the day, this was the only thing the radio played. What you heard on the radio, you never think it could be wrong. They told you, “Kill, kill, kill! The enemy must die! Babies! Don’t spare the elders. Don’t loot before, kill first.” (Interview of November 10, 1998)

Overlooking the fact that women can be warriors may have serious consequences. Women killers may use the popular perception of women as the gentler sex to their own advantage. African Rights notes that officials in a number of African and European countries, unaware of the involvement of women in the

1994 slaughters, unquestioningly granted refuge to Rwandan Hutu women who purported to be victims of the violence when in fact they fled Rwanda to avoid charges of genocide (1995).

In addition, it is fashionable for development programs in post-conflict societies to emphasize the importance of women as facilitators of ethnic reconciliation. The assumption is that women are better suited for this role because they are less warlike than men. One wonders how effective such programs will be in Rwanda, where the individuals given resources and the task of building community after the genocide are the very same ones who perpetrated the genocide. Nevertheless, the largest women's group in Rwanda, *Pro-Femmes*, itself employs the message of woman as peacemaker: "At the same time those victimized and those responsible, Rwandan women hold the key to reconciliation, education, and the orientation of a new society" (1998, p 6; author's translation).

Notes

1. Portions of this paper appear in my doctoral dissertation "Sexual violence as political terror." The University of California, Davis Pro Femina Research Consortium and the Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation funded this project.
2. In conducting this research and during my stay in Rwanda, I heard mention of sexual violation of men or boys in Rwanda.

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