

**Élize Féron, *Wartime Sexual Violence Against Men: Masculinities and Power in Conflict Zones*. London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018.**

Pages: 200.

SOFT COVER ISBN: 978-1-9206-2010-3

**Reviewer: Selina Palm<sup>1</sup>**

**SHORT BIO**

Dr Selina Palm is a feminist scholar-activist based at the interdisciplinary Unit for Religion and Development Research at Stellenbosch University. She consults for organisations around the world to disrupt violence against women, children, and queer bodies and has worked, or provided empirical research, in over 20 countries.

**INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION**

Unit for Religion & Development Research, Stellenbosch University, South Africa; spalm@sun.ac.za

**ORCID**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7511-0170>

Élize Féron's concise book is an important and sobering read and includes a detailed synthesis of her empirical fieldwork in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Ireland since 2005. She shines a spotlight on a theme which frequently remains invisible or exceptionalised in global research around sexual violence, namely men as victims of sexual abuse in conflict-affected settings. Féron argues that breaking this silence is an urgent feminist task if the patriarchal roots of sexual violence by men against multiple victims are to be better understood. This call needs to be heard by all people who are working on sexual violence today. The book highlights the lived experiences of male survivors and male perpetrators in multiple settings, enabling her theoretical analysis of how violence is understood, narrated, and addressed to emerge from concrete contexts of experience.

Féron focuses on the power dynamics underlying sexual violence which often construct dominant/subordinate relations. She pays attention to how both masculine and feminine are constructed in conflict-related settings where a hyper-militarised masculinity is performed. She argues that in some settings, up to one third of all conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) is against men,<sup>1</sup> but that this is glossed over by many

---

<sup>1</sup> Élize Féron, *Wartime Sexual Violence Against Men: Masculinities and Power in Conflict Zones* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), 2.

prevailing paradigms that position men only as aggressive perpetrators. She challenges this silence as myopic and incomplete. She is, however, sensitive to concerns by feminist scholars that including sexual violence against men may run the risk of making women survivors invisible, or reinscribing forms of naturalised patriarchy that regard women as more “rape-able” than men. However, she insists that if sexual violence is about power, then a broader analysis helps to “unveil the underlying structures of power”<sup>2</sup> and adds to the feminist task. She bridges a gap between post-structural feminism and hegemonic masculinity approaches to explore how bodies become gendered in society, through the lens of sexual violence.

At the heart of the book is a concern with “the idea that through wartime sexual violence against men in particular, social hierarchies are imposed, maintained or contested.”<sup>3</sup> This intersectional approach relates gender norms to other dimensions of power and historical, political, and cultural contexts. Her focus on men is not about excluding boys, but exploring the meaning of violence against those publicly regarded as embodying masculinity in this setting.<sup>4</sup> She “understands wartime sexual violence as a gendered performance that uses patriarchal and heterosexual norms in order to enforce or enact a new power order.”<sup>5</sup>

The book is divided into seven chapters within which Féron builds her argument around her 80 interviews with mainly male combatants across the three countries.<sup>6</sup> The first chapter sets out an overview of existing empirical frameworks on CRSV and its limits. The second shows how CRSV is related to power hierarchies, including gender, and founded in patriarchal assumptions.<sup>7</sup> Chapters 3 and 4 deep dive into the lived experiences and stories of male perpetrators and male survivors. Chapter 5 builds an argument from these diverse stories about the gendered narratives that can hinder and silence reporting this type of violence at multiple levels. Chapter 6 looks at programmes of care and support and the need for both men and women to be included, whilst Chapter 7 points to a challenge around prosecuting male CRSV.

---

<sup>2</sup> Féron, *Wartime Sexual Violence Against Men*, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Féron, *Wartime Sexual Violence Against Men*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Féron, *Wartime Sexual Violence Against Men*, 7.

<sup>5</sup> Féron, *Wartime Sexual Violence Against Men*, 13.

<sup>6</sup> Féron, *Wartime Sexual Violence Against Men*, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Féron, *Wartime Sexual Violence Against Men*, 14.

Féron first explores current framings of CRSV which she feels offer essentialised approaches to militarised masculinities, an emphasis on structural factors or a focus only on the gender transaction between male perpetrator and female victim.<sup>8</sup> She suggests that these leave important questions unanswered such as the nexus between sexual violence and other taxonomies of violence.<sup>9</sup> She argues that a new framing can also shed light on CRSV against women by exploring how the process of feminisation (of both men and women) takes place in the light of gender plasticity. Féron situates sexual violence within a gendered power structure that is tied into structures of domination between men as well as between women. By focusing on combatants – positioned as dominant and violent men – she shows how the values of the wider social gendered order are employed to feminise victims, whether they are male or female. Wartime violence against men is embedded in the patriarchal principles that underpin sexual violence against women, as “part of a repertoire of violence that simultaneously produces, and is produced, by a certain social order.”<sup>10</sup>

Féron’s situation of sexual violence within a gendered power structure is then developed further. Chapter 2 notes that when other ways to exert masculinity are lost, sexual violence can be used to reassert one’s place. Sexual violence against men is often depicted as crossing new “thresholds of horror.” She suggests that these have been far less theorised than that of women who are often made visible as “lust bounties” or as “weapons of war.” These strategies form part of a methodology of extremes with “bodies as canvas for a message of barbaric extravagance,”<sup>11</sup> depicted as part of a broader strategy of brutalisation. Militarised masculinity regards men who do not fight as feminised cowards, as military values can also become part of the social fabric with sexual violence weaponised. The group bonding aspect of sexual violence frequently shapes young male combatants who want to belong, while women soldiers can also participate in this to prove their “masculinity” and toughness. To rape is considered a male pursuit, but to be raped is regarded as being feminised. Féron notes that international

---

<sup>8</sup> Féron, *Wartime Sexual Violence Against Men*, 19.

<sup>9</sup> Féron, *Wartime Sexual Violence Against Men*, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Féron, *Wartime Sexual Violence Against Men*, 39.

<sup>11</sup> Féron, *Wartime Sexual Violence Against Men*, 49.

actors can also use modes of domination in their torture methods and colonising power relations<sup>12</sup> with narratives around local sexual violence even used to justify Western intervention.<sup>13</sup>

Féron's book goes beyond common media stereotypes to explore the complex motivators and benefits for perpetrators of forms of sexual violence. Her male survivor interviews delve into the political meaning of the sexual torture of men in places like Ireland, as well as ways in which the sexual shame and feminisation of men also reverberates onto their families.<sup>14</sup> Male survivors who are forced to "perform as women" in sexual and social roles (such as bush wives) can struggle long term with a loss of "male" social status<sup>15</sup> and can remain in limbo, with their health needs ignored by doctors or by demobilisation processes.<sup>16</sup> Féron points to the misleading nature of a discourse of exceptionality often used around same-gender sexual violence. She also raises the question of women perpetrators, a phenomenon occurring especially in the Eastern DRC.<sup>17</sup> She refutes a heteronormative frame on rape to argue that male CRSV is often desexualised and male bodies degendered by using terms such as "torture" or "treated as a woman," rather than recognising this as rape<sup>18</sup> and also by searching for political (rather than sexual) motives.<sup>19</sup> While women's limited visibility in international politics is often mainly around sexual violence, men, who are more visible overall, remain invisible on this issue, suggesting a shared refusal to see male sexual vulnerability.<sup>20</sup>

Féron's final chapters warn against a gender-exclusive approach to CRSV that reinforces a male perpetrator/female victim binary and makes sexual violence against men invisible.<sup>21</sup> This has practical implications both for survivor support services, which often only target women, and for prosecution of perpetrators. Men survivors, like women, face fear and

---

<sup>12</sup> Féron, *Wartime Sexual Violence Against Men*, 55.

<sup>13</sup> Féron, *Wartime Sexual Violence Against Men*, 58.

<sup>14</sup> Féron, *Wartime Sexual Violence Against Men*, 102.

<sup>15</sup> Féron, *Wartime Sexual Violence Against Men*, 114.

<sup>16</sup> Féron, *Wartime Sexual Violence Against Men*, 113.

<sup>17</sup> Féron, *Wartime Sexual Violence Against Men*, 123.

<sup>18</sup> Féron, *Wartime Sexual Violence Against Men*, 118.

<sup>19</sup> Féron, *Wartime Sexual Violence Against Men*, 125.

<sup>20</sup> Féron, *Wartime Sexual Violence Against Men*, 129.

<sup>21</sup> Féron, *Wartime Sexual Violence Against Men*, 133.

shame, but also further disbelief, with a common conflation of male rape with homosexuality. Féron notes that three quarters of the world's population live in countries that only recognise female rape.<sup>22</sup> She links CRSV for perpetrators and victims to larger political and military strategies, embedded in a patriarchal heteronormative discourse,<sup>23</sup> and calls for change in how CRSV is framed and understood.<sup>24</sup> She argues that sustainable prevention requires a three-tier approach to address individual perpetrators, group accountability, and military culture change. Féron is aware that this could turn the attention away from female survivors, giving "male survivors an entry card into the business."<sup>25</sup> However, her core claim is that to focus only on sexual violence against women, re-biologises them and fails to regard men as having vulnerable sexual bodies. She concludes: *'The fact that wartime sexual violence against men hasn't received much attention yet means that a certain vision of masculinity as invulnerable and as the backbone of the national, ethnic or religious group can be preserved...the hypervisibility of the sexual brutalisation of women vs the silencing of the sexual brutalisation of men are two sides of the same patriarchal and heteronormative coin. Unveiling and highlighting this is a major feminist task.'*<sup>26</sup>

This book stimulates critical engagement by showing how silence on this matter is anti-feminist. It offers a nuanced theoretical framework rooted in lived experiences. As an empirical researcher in the South on sexual violence in conflict-affected zones, I strongly commend it as a difficult but necessary read for all researchers concerned with super-subordination structures of power that shape how masculinity is constructed and sexually performed in violent ways on the bodies of women and men.

## Reference

Féron, Élise, *Wartime Sexual Violence Against Men: Masculinities and Power in Conflict Zones*. London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018.

---

<sup>22</sup> Féron, *Wartime Sexual Violence Against Men*, 160.

<sup>23</sup> Féron, *Wartime Sexual Violence Against Men*, 173.

<sup>24</sup> Féron, *Wartime Sexual Violence Against Men*, 173.

<sup>25</sup> Féron, *Wartime Sexual Violence Against Men*, 93.

<sup>26</sup> Féron, *Wartime Sexual Violence Against Men*, 175 (emphasis added).