

OUR BODIES THEIR BATTLEFIELD: WHAT WAR DOES TO WOMEN?

Bedenlerimiz Onların Savaş Alanı: Savaş Kadınlara Ne Yapar?

Şevket AKYILDIZ*

ABSTRACT

Christina Lamb's *Our Bodies Their Battlefield: What War Does to Women?* explains that men's sexual violence is designed to humiliate women and entire communities in a war context. Furthermore, Lamb's study highlights women's testimony in fighting stigmatisation and ostracisation in conservative societies. The study also discusses the physical, psychological, legal and socio-economic problems women face because of the violence done to them. In particular, the author emphasizes the historical failure of the national governments to address the abuse of women by combatants and that only now sexual violence in war is being taken seriously. Importantly, Lamb outlines hope among women as they struggle to rebuild individual lives, families and communities in their homelands or abroad. The book contains a prologue, 15 chapters and a postscript. The content of each chapter is worth mentioning because it shows the depth and breadth of Lamb's research and the useful comparisons and contrasts the author makes about the treatment of women in each war or conflict.

Keywords: war, women, crimes, military culture, gender.

ÖZ

Christina Lamb'ın *Bedenlerimiz Onların Savaş Alanı: Savaş Kadınlara Ne Yapar?* adlı kitabı, erkeklerin cinsel şiddetinin kadınları ve tüm toplulukları savaş bağlamında aşağılamak için tasarlandığını açıklıyor. Ayrıca Lamb'ın çalışması, kadınların muhafazakâr toplumlarda damgalanma ve dışlanmayla mücadeledeki ifadelerini vurgulamaktadır. Çalışma ayrıca kadınların kendilerine yapılan şiddet nedeniyle karşılaştıkları fiziksel, psikolojik, yasal ve sosyo-ekonomik sorunları da tartışıyor. Özellikle yazar, ulusal hükümetlerin kadınların savaşçılar tarafından istismar edilmesini ele almadaki tarihsel başarısızlığını ve ancak şimdi savaşta cinsel şiddetin ciddiye alındığını vurguluyor. Daha da önemlisi, Lamb, anavatanlarında veya yurtdışında bireysel yaşamları, aileleri ve toplulukları yeniden inşa etmek için mücadele ederken kadınlar arasındaki umudu özetliyor. Kitap bir önsöz, 15 bölüm ve bir son not içeriyor. Her bö-

* Dr., SOAS, University of London, United Kingdom. E-mail: sevketa.kyildiz1@gmail.com. ORCID: 0000-0001-9545-4432.

lümün içeriğinden bahsetmeye değer çünkü Lamb'ın araştırmasının derinliğini ve genişliğini ve yazarın her savaşta veya çatışmada kadınlara yönelik muamele hakkında yaptığı yararlı karşılaştırmaları ve zıtlıkları gösteriyor.

Anahtar Sözcükler: savaş, kadın, suç, askeri kültür, cinsiyet.

Lamb, Christina (2020). *Our Bodies Their Battlefield: What War Does to Women?* London: William Collins.

Until recently, the historiography of warfare taught at schools, colleges, and universities focused on what men have done to other men in the context of armed conflict. However, today, what is increasingly examined by academics and journalists are the horrendous acts of mass rape and torture committed by men (soldiers, militias, guerrilla fighters and police) against women and children. This appalling reality of armed war and conflict needs and should be discussed widely in all societies. Only then can steps be taken by national governments and the United Nations to outlaw rape and sexual violence as a weapon of war (as has been done with cluster bombs and laser weapons).

Christina Lamb's *Our Bodies Their Battlefield: What War Does to Women* explains that men's sexual violence is designed to humiliate women and entire communities in a war context. It dehumanises and terrorises people to the point that they and their families flee a geographical area. It can destroy entire communities. Indeed, "Rape as a weapon of war can displace a whole demographic and have the same effect as a conventional weapon but at much lesser cost", says Dr Mukwege (Nobel Peace Prize winner 2018) (Lamb, 2020: 305).

Furthermore, Lamb's study highlights women's testimony in fighting stigmatisation and ostracisation in conservative societies. The study also discusses the physical, psychological, legal and socio-economic problems women face because of the violence done to them. In particular, the author emphasises the historical failure of the national governments to address the abuse of women by combatants and that only now sexual violence in war is being taken seriously. Importantly, Lamb outlines hope among women as they struggle to rebuild individual lives, families and communities in their homelands or abroad.

The book contains a prologue, 15 chapters and a postscript. The content of each chapter is worth mentioning because it shows the depth and breadth of Lamb's research and the useful comparisons and contrasts the author

makes about the treatment of women in each war or conflict. Chapters one (On Mussolini's Island) and two (The Girls in the Forest) explore the lives of the Yazidi refugee women and children on the Greek Island of Leros living in a derelict mental asylum, and the former mental institution at Baden Wurttemberg, Germany. Both groups had previously been captured and held as enslaved people by ISIS. Chapter three (The Power of a Hashtag) tells the stories of the large numbers of schoolgirls held in northern Nigeria by Boko Haram and forced to work for and marry them. Chapter four (Queue Here for the Rape Victim) gives the account of the Muslim Rohingya women ethnically cleansed by the Burmese/Myanmar army, the Rakhine Buddhists and the government circa 2017. Chapter five (Women Who Stare into Space) discusses the Bangladeshi women raped during the war between Pakistan and Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan). Chapter six (The Women Who Changed History) investigates the Rwandan Tutsi women ethnically cleansed by the majority Hutus. In October 1998, the UN-backed Rwanda Trial saw for "the first time ever that rape had been recognised as an instrument of genocide and prosecuted as a war crime in an international court" (Lamb, 2020: 147-148). Chapter seven (The Roses of Sarajevo) is about the Muslim Bosnian woman attacked by Serbian forces during the break up of Yugoslavia in the mid-1990s. Lamb mentions: "Bosnia was the first war in which there was widespread international media coverage of the mass rapes that were happening" (Lamb, 2020: 199). Chapter eight (This is What a Genocide Looks Like) outlines the Srebrenica massacre and the systematic sexual abuse of Muslim women when the town fell to Serbian forces.

Chapter nine (The Hunting Hour) reviews the rape of women during the Second World War in Europe, particularly against civilian German women by Soviet forces (Other cases noted are the Vikings, the Mongol army, and the Northern Union soldiers during the American Civil War). Chapter ten (Then There Was Silence) studies imprisoned women in Argentina under the military junta of 1976 to 1983. Chapter eleven (The Beekeeper of Aleppo) turns to the Yazidi women in Northern Iraq and Syria and their experiences. The next chapter (The Nineveh Trails) accounts for the trails of ISIS men involved in the Yazidi female slave trade. Chapter thirteen (Dr. Miracle and the City of Joy) highlights the story of the abuses of the women of the Democratic Republic of Congo—and the attempts by Dr Mukwege to assist Congo's women. Chapter fourteen (Mummy Didn't Close the Door Properly...) details the at-

tacks on female children in rural Congo. Chapter fifteen describes the Filipino, Korean and Chinese women kept as enslaved people by the Japanese Army during the Second World War.

Lamb, in the postscript (*Giving the Nightingale her Song*) highlights the urgent steps needed to help women in war zones, the prosecution of the perpetrators, and the need to recognize rape as a crime against humanity. In Guatemala, the crimes against the local Mayan women during the 1980s resulted in lengthy prison sentences in 2010 for army officers and paramilitary leaders: ‘It was the first time anyone had faced justice for sexual violence during the war – and the first time anywhere in the world that sexual slavery perpetrated during an armed conflict had been prosecuted in the country where the crimes actually took place’, reports Lamb (p. 350). The British Foreign Office in 2012 established the Prevention of Sexual Violence in Conflict Team (PSVI). In 2014, 155 countries signed up in London to prevent sexual violence in conflict (Lamb, 2020: 378). While in 2016, the International Criminal Court (ICC) found Pierre Bemba, a Congolese warlord and former Vice-President “guilty of murder, rape and pillage of civilians by his men. It was a historic decision – the first conviction by the ICC on sexual violence and the first time it had found a commander guilty for actions committed by his troops” (Lamb, 2020: 319–320). In another case, in 2019, Gambia took Burma to court for genocide against the Rohingya (Lamb, 2020: 376).

The text’s strength is the author’s raising in the public sphere the crime rape of women during wars and armed conflicts and the use of mass rape of women and children during ethnic cleansing and genocide. Hopefully, today and tomorrow’s students and scholars of war and military history will be much better informed about the treatment of female civilians. Aisha’s (1971) heartfelt statement about her experience in the Bangladesh war reinforces this point: “We have given our most precious thing and have died inside many times but you won’t find our names engraved on any monument or war memorial” (front cover matter).

Perhaps Lamb could have mentioned more detail about the role of alcohol and drugs taken by the combatants as they commit their crimes (Lamb, 2020: 127; 194–195; 341). The descriptions of the atrocities against women, teenagers, and children are shocking. *Our Bodies Their Battlefield: What War Does to Women* makes the reader reflect on the nature of man, military culture, attitudes towards women, and the role of propaganda and racist rhetoric against minorities and the other. The book is essential for students and scholars of warfare, and politicians.

Reference

Lamb, Christina (2020). *Our Bodies Their Battlefield: What War Does to Women?* London: William Collins.

The following statements are made in the framework of “COPE-Code of Conduct and Best Practices Guidelines for Journal Editors”:

Ethics Committee Approval: Ethics committee approval is not required for this study.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests: The author has no potential conflict of interest regarding research, authorship or publication of this article.