Language, Power, and the Media in the Portrayal of Wartime Sexual Violence

Morgana Angeli, University of Edinburgh

Edited by Gaya Karalasingam and Jeanne Gonelle

ABSTRACT

Sexual violence has increasingly been recognised – and framed – as a war crime. This essay seeks to unpack the normative and epistemological elements of this discourse. The literature is dominated by peacetime studies of gender and language which fail to analyse elements of shock and labels in the construction of the actors at play. This paper seeks to understand how language, power and media work together to infantilize women and create an implicit dichotomy of victims and survivors. Drawing on critical feminist and post-structural theories, it is argued that media agents play a significant role in shaping perception and defining policy on wartime rape, through language patterns and themes. It is concluded that the language employed by news articles contributes to the gendered socialization of wartime rape. The argument is illustrated by a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of two news channels, Al Jazeera and Fox News, which seeks to identify the common discursive themes and demonstrates that the rhetoric employed is self-perpetuating and is conducive to gendered assumptions and shortcomings.

Introduction

Media is a powerful and pervasive influence in our daily lives, shaping our opinions and perceptions. This critical discourse analysis (CDA) examines how the language news articles use and reproduce creates patriarchal notions contributing to a 'gendered social construction of wartime rape'.

Analysing ten articles by Al Jazeera and Fox News within a six-year range dating from September 2015 to November 2021, I describe how language is employed to reinforce stereotypes and traditional roles that normalise violence against women. In particular, using a post-structural feminist lens, this CDA critically analyses the use of the terms 'victim' and 'survivor' in war. Assessing language, labels, and themes employed in the coverage of wartime rape, this study contributes to the existing literature on 'peacetime' rape, where 'peacetime' refers to a period when a country is outside of conflict.

The core of my argument is that news sources – still dominated by men's voices and traditional masculinist war narratives – communicate images of men as natural 'predators' and women as inevitably, their 'victims'. These implications extend beyond typical gendered analysis, particularly in wartime contexts where 'victim-blaming' isn't the primary focus. Instead, they reinforce the hierarchical gender roles of dominance and submission.

Literature Review

Scholarly literature on the power of language in wartime rape discourse has been an evolving and contested subject shaped by different waves of feminism and evolutions in critical theory. The first section of this literature review draws out views on language as both a source and an iteration of power in feminist thought. I then consider the vastly diverging views on the use of the words 'victim' and 'survivor' in defining people that have experienced rape and the effect these have on shaping rhetoric. Finally, I describe the use of shock tactics employed by the media to shape policy and the implications therein. The literature presented will serve as a basis for critically evaluating the language of selected news sources.

Knowledge and Power

That language holds power is a concept that many critical schools of thought and post-structural theorists have incorporated into their work. Shepard (2010, 15) claims academics should take a more critical approach to the reproduction of knowledge through the writing of policy and other crucial documents. Ayiera (2010, 13) expands on Shepard, arguing that international relations discourse uncritically accepts patriarchal ideology. Scholars fail to address gendered language and biases, and that results in the perpetuation of gender inequalities. Skjelsbaek (2010) gives an example of this bias, namely the popular characterisation of sexual violence as a 'weapon of war'. Although this conceptualization is not clearly defined or evidenced in political discourse, its widespread use has made it "common knowledge," which exemplifies the self-reinforcing power of language in creating knowledge (Skjelsbaek 2010, 27). Bolseth (2013) articulates in her CDA that power dynamics are intertwined with commu-

nication, where statements made by people in power shape information and knowledge. She highlights this by outlining the discursive landscape of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), drawing back to King Leopold II's (1908-1960) language during his colonial reign. Bolseth compare his use of language to identical rhetoric used by UN Special Representative Margot Wallströms in April 2010 characterizing the country as the "rape capital of the world" (Bolseth 2013, 34).

'Victim/Survivor' Dichotomy

Whether a person who has experienced sexual violence is described as a 'victim', 'survivor', or neither or both, is a controversial debate among feminist scholars. Scholars tend to disagree on the terms and their implications in language. 'Victims' are predominantly conceptualized as weak, passive and powerless – terms that are often attributed to femininity. As such, recent neoliberal debates (Kelly, Burton and Regan 1996) criticize the word, arguing it is inherently stigmatized and deemed undesirable. Especially when it is the language of 'victim' that prevails in the majority of policy, media and literature regarding wartime sexual violence. They claim the word 'survivor' instead to attempt to emancipate the language of rape. Ross (2022) problematizes this neoliberal conception of the word 'victim', arguing its rejection and substitution with 'survivor' or otherwise, is in and of itself a form of 'victim-blaming' as it puts pressure on those who are assaulted and blames them for suffering as a result.

According to Kelly, Burton and Regan (1996), the terms 'victim' and 'survivor' should all together not be employed as they establish a problematic dichotomy, leading to questions about who qualifies as a 'victim' versus a 'survivor' and who has the authority to determine where the threshold lies for an individual to be categorized as such. They contend that this language perpetuates a form of 'victim-blaming', and therefore, neither label should be employed to characterize an individual's experience (Kelly, Burton and Regan 1996, 92). Herein, the scholars outline an exercise carried out where participants were required to list words they associate with 'victim' and 'survivor'; the study resulted in a 'conceptual split' where the 'victim' was heavily characterised by negative descriptors while the 'survivor' was positive and desirable. As such, they find that more generic categorizations such as 'children', 'young people', 'adults' or 'women' are best suited to avoid reproducing power values embedded in discourse.

Bonnes's (2013, 217) analysis in her CDA severely disagrees with this argument, countering that these terms must be used to emphasise the role of the perpetrator. She criticizes news articles for using descriptors like 'women', 'children' and 'girls' rather than the label identified above, as she finds that specific language is crucial in creating associations of blame or innocence (Bonnes 2013, 218). These associations in turn serve to facilitate the identification and punishment of perpetrators. Lewis (2015) builds on Bonnes's research method to investigate how discourse in the media contributes to the perception of rape. She identifies how the news, through active discursive framing,

skews the perception of 'victims/survivors' and perpetrators and contributes to the social construction of rape. Many scholars focus their analysis on instances of 'peacetime' rape where 'victim-blaming' is prominent, but few, if any studies, look at the language of perpetrators in 'wartime'. While scholars make valuable contributions by discussing how language influences how society perceives the 'victim/survivor' dichotomy and the severity of incidents of rape, they fail to analyse language within the broader context of gender dynamics. This is evident as scholars exclusively focus on the rape of 'women and children' by men, which though prevalent is not the only manifestation. This narrow characterization excludes the possibility of women as perpetrators and men as 'victims', positioning women as natural prey to predatory men.

Shock Tactics

Ayiera (2010) emphasizes research on wartime rape has employed shock tactics to generate momentum. She gives examples of phrases such as "rape as a weapon of war" and "the war is fought on women's bodies" to highlight the phraseology emerging from Ayiera's study (2010, 11). She adds that the international focus on the scale and scope of sexual violence implies that this form of violence is notable only when it involves large numbers and egregious 'newsworthy' acts (Ayiera 2010, 8). Herein, she stipulates that such 'hierarchies' of crime ignore the patriarchal dimension of sexual violence and reflect the view that violence against women, unless topical or lurid, is a private matter. Similarly, Dragotesc (2011) provides the example of the DRC to discuss how its characterization as the rape capital of the world by the UN appropriates the tragedy of

Congolese women essentialises sexual violence in the country, and ultimately place rape as a pivotal part of the Congolese identity. Lewis (2015, 13) counters these arguments by discussing how the sensationalization of crimes through shock reporting is beneficial in mobilizing global attention and legal repercussions. Though this may be true, through her very argument Lewis fails to critically reflect in their work on the power language holds in creating canonical knowledge and shaping policy. This shortcoming is evident as there is no discussion on the possible implications of shock tactics and their potential negative effects.

Considering the post-structural arguments posited by these academics, and drawing on certain shortcomings identified, this report aims to investigate how news articles use language to reinforce and reproduce gendered power structures.

Methodology

This CDA uses a poststructural feminist framework to shape the methodological choices and critically engage with the content and theory. This approach looks particularly at the social construction of gendered subjectivities and seeks to investigate the relationships between power, language, and subjectivity concerning gender (Prasad 2015, 165).

Firstly, this form of analysis requires researchers to critically engage with how our understanding of language and power is medi-

ated through and facilitated by preconceptions about the world we live in (Shepherd 2010, 144). Therefore, examining positionality is necessary to understand what shapes the researcher's interpretations of knowledge and the set experiences which contribute to their analysis. As a woman with an interest in feminist theory, my interpretations and criticisms are not independent of my positionality and thus may inadvertently reflect some of the critical views and implicit bias in my analysis. An example that could influence my research is that I might inherently prioritize the rape, and experience of women, overlooking men as 'victims/survivors'. Herein, the researcher is a part of the structure that shapes knowledge.

I analysed ten news articles from Al Jazeera and Fox News ranging from September 2015 to November 2021. These two news databases were selected because they represent antipodal geopolitical stances, Al Jazeera being based in Qatar and Fox News in the United States. This was done to minimize political bias and identify generic themes in the media. I searched news databases for articles on 'wartime rape', and found that most articles only secondarily mention sexual violence in war. Therefore, I selected the top ten sources based on relevance within the outlined time frame. A more systematic sampling system would have enhanced reliability, but an overall lack of focused media coverage made this the preferable choice. In addition, examining only two news sources may affect the external validity of my research, and the results may not be representative of the language employed by all news databases. I selected current articles but purposefully

excluded those on the Russia-Ukraine and Palestine-Israel conflicts as the polarized opinions within these wars could have drastically shifted the coverage. Excluding them helped ensure a more balanced selection and clearer representation of diverse perspectives on wartime rape. Each article was printed and coded by hand. The coding process was based on the principles of poststructural feminist analysis, as I derived codes from common themes identified by gender scholars. While some codes were preconceived, others emerged through close readings of the articles.

This essay uses qualitative methods of research (CDA) to examine how news articles portray individuals as either 'survivors/victims' or 'perpetrators', and to understand how this language reinforces gendered power dynamics. As discussed by Kelly, Burton and Regan (1996), the 'survivor/victim' dichotomy is important in determining who qualifies to be a 'survivor', who does not and what this implies for the discourse on sexual violence. Furthermore, when considering Bonnes (2013), the role of the perpetrator can be highlighted or de-emphasized based on the labels used. By using a qualitative method rather than a word count, I was able to assess the contexts in which the words appear, as well as critically interpret the tone. Moreover, CDA is primarily concerned with the function of rhetoric in enacting, reproducing, and opposing power hierarchies, dominance, and inequality (Mullet 2018). It argues that language is always employed purposefully, consciously or unconsciously (Mullet 2018). Therefore, recognizing the implications of language allows us to critically understand how

the way knowledge is represented leads to a global consensus toward wartime rape wherein gendered identities and power relations are reproduced (Dragotesc 2011).

Although the methods presented assist in critically framing the research, they also create some limitations. This approach increases the risk of researcher bias, which compromises the validity and replicability of the research. This is because the researcher's positionality and corresponding cognitive bias play a part in identifying relevant themes and analysing their relevance. Although the themes identified in the literature and critical theory were readily apparent, some articles may have required a more comprehensive examination, potentially yielding different results if replicated.

Analysis
Women/'Victims', Men/'Predators'

In CDA the research is concerned with how language, knowledge, culture, and ideology are employed, interpreted, and related to certain situations to form specific ideative patterns (Lindekilde 2014, 196). In the sampled articles, I identify how the discourse underpins gender stereotypes and essentializes the roles of women and men in conflict-related sexual violence. By analysing the infantilization of women and the vilification of men, the patriarchal influence on shaping the social construction of wartime rape becomes evident.

On the one hand, a notable trend in the data is the overall infantilization of women through the association of women with children. Enloe (2014) criticizes the rhetoric of the indistinguishable 'women and children', whereby women are portrayed as just as vulnerable to violence as their children. This happens in several articles, where sexual violence is said to be "systematically inflicted by combatants on girls and women" and "used to terrorize women and children" (Associated Press 2018; McFall 2021). Furthermore, one of the articles (Craig 2021) portrays targeted women and children as a "soft spot for this [Cameroon] war." In this context, the crude metaphor reveals latent power dynamics which naturalize gendered hierarchies and reinforce feminized identities. Women in conflict are defined in the media by their vulnerability to sexual assault and need for protection. For example, in Cameroon "fear and anxiety are shared by many women." This perpetuates gendered shorthands about women's innate weakness and men's predatory disposition (Craig 2021; Khan 2022).

On the other hand, war has historically been a male space, where politicians, admirals, and soldiers continue to dominate the field. Therefore, hegemonic masculinity is essentialized and perpetuated in representations and narratives about war. The articles reflect this masculine dominance in the violent and active characterization of perpetrators as "victorious fighters [...] using sexual violence out of a sense of impunity or entitlement" and describe their explicit role in "committing widespread sexual violence" (Associated Press 2018; Aljazeera 2021). The active language used to describe men in conflict is in stark contrast with the passive, "terrorized" and "soft" descriptions of women.

'Victim/Survivor' Dichotomy

Newspapers' use of labels to highlight or de-emphasize the severity of wartime rape plays a significant role in the reassertion of gendered power structures. To fully understand the implications of knowledge production, it is crucial to identify how these words are used, their significance in the articles and how they shape the prevailing narrative.

Recent neoliberal studies, as noted by Kelly, Burton, and Regan's (1996) work, argue that the term 'victim' carries an inherent stigma and is viewed unfavourably due to its association with passivity and weakness. The CDA indicates that the majority of articles employ the term "victim" to describe those affected by sexual violence – a total of 45 times throughout the 10 articles. By consistently framing them as such, the media here plays a significant role in further marginalizing and disempowering the women it refers to. This language reinforces notions of helplessness and vulnerability, overshadowing the agency and resilience of those affected.

On the other side of the dichotomy, is the 'survivor' imperative only employed by half the articles, 15 times overall. This label is rarely used within the texts analysed, with the only outlier being a Fox News article (McKay 2019) accounting for 7 of the 15 times the term was used. What distinguishes this article from all others is that its content is concerned with "male rape" as "emerging as one of the most underreported weapons of war" (McKay 2019). Not only does the tone applied reject that wartime rape of men is commonplace, but this discourse explicitly indicates that, unlike women, men are 'strong enough to transcend from victim to 'survivor''. This type of socialization characterizes 'victims' as feminine, and reinforces the gender dichotomy of male/female, as a parallel of the 'survivor/victim' dichotomy.

Wartime Rape and the Political Other

The majority of articles, when discussing wartime rape, essentialize the act, normalizing its prevalence in conflict. An example of this is one article's characterization of sexual violence as "a savage feature of armed conflict" (Associated Press 2018). The negative tone of the word "savage," coupled with the disturbing acquiescence in reporting it as a feature of war belonging typically to it and serving to identify it, highlights this normalization. Furthermore, the active condemnation of individual perpetrators, government policies and cultures present in other articles, facilitates the creation of a space where wartime rape is accepted and normalized (Associated Press, 2017b). An example of this is the depiction of Cameroon as having "devolved into a state of 'lawlessness'" and "if the UN sexual abuse crisis has an epicentre, it is the Congo." The use of this language presents a crude picture of war and everyday realities, perpetuating the notion that sexual assault in conflict is an inevitable crime committed by "savage" men against 'vulnerable' women in a "lawless state" (Khan 2022). Furthermore, phrases such as "rape is a weapon of war," present in the majority of articles, "[...]when you get the woman, you get the nation" (McNeish 2015) and "the young woman didn't expect to become embroiled in South Sudan's conflict" (Associated Press 2017a),

reproduce the problematic metaphor identified by Dragotesc of the female body as a political and cultural site and the woman as a symbol of her community (2011). In essence, this data underscores the need for a critical examination of language and discourse in media surrounding conflict and gender-based violence. By questioning and deconstructing these narratives, it becomes evident that colonial legacies as well as patriarchal structures are ingrained in knowledge production as a way to isolate and condemn the Global South (Dragotesc 2011).

Conclusion

In conclusion, language is a key element in the reproduction of knowledge. This CDA investigated how the language employed by news articles contributes to the gendered socialisation of wartime rape. The research was approached through a poststructural feminist lens, aiming to critically evaluate not only the gendered dynamics but also the underlying social implications that gave rise to them. Through my analysis, I attempted to expand on existing academic work by Bonnes and Ayiera, amongst others, regarding 'peacetime' rape and language in foreign policy by extending my research to include rape in conflict. To this effect, I believe the results show that the media uses gender shorthand and patriarchal language to reinforce social structures and gendered hierarchies of power. This work is important in its contribution to the global discourse on wartime sexual violence and the deconstruction of language in the media as it provides a critique of existing literature and builds on the gaps identified therein. Notwithstanding, the subjective

element of CDA means that my own experiences and positionality could have shaped the findings, thus limiting the objective replicability and reliability of this study as opposed to other methods. The research could have been expanded by including a wider range of newspapers analysed and focusing more on the differences, if any, amongst different political news contexts. Furthermore, it would be interesting to look at the media concerning policy statements and public opinion to reflect on the influence of the former on the latter.

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