

Main Article

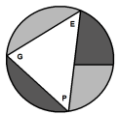
The Ethnic Womb and the Symbolic Hearth: How Identity Politics Made Women Targets of Sexual Violence in Nagorno-Karabakh

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Abstract Rather than framing gendered violence as inevitable in conflict, understanding it as a unique aspect of combat enables us to interpret the ethnogeopolitical factors which sparked war in Nagorno-Karabakh as equally crucial in explaining the outbreak of sexual violence. In the aftermath of the USSR's dissolution, unclear ethnic/territorial claims and the collapse of an overarching Soviet identity created a condition of ontological insecurity where violence served to establish belonging within an ingroup and assert positive distinctiveness over an outgroup. Where women represent the biological and cultural (re)producers of the nation as the ethnic womb and the symbolic hearth, an attack on the mother becomes an attack on the overall ethnics. Therefore, gender-based violence in Nagorno-Karabakh may be interpreted as a tool used to redress the existential anxiety caused by ontological insecurity.

Key words: Identity Politics, Nagorno-Karabakh, Gender-Based Violence, Ontological Insecurity, Ethno-Nationalist War

“The home front and war front became almost indistinguishable and often it was not possible to determine where it was more dangerous, at home or on the front line.”—*Gagik, an Armenian boy who trained other child-fighters* (Shahnazarian & Ziemer 2012: 1673-1676)



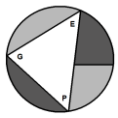
Introduction

In reviewing the last century's tally of conflicts, it is rare to find any without an integral component of gender-based violence (GBV). From the "bush-wife" carrying out domestic tasks by day and sexual services by night to children forced into sex rings by peacekeepers, conflict is rife with sexual assault (Holzner 2011: 42; Allen-Ebrahimian 2017). However, while rape often becomes an "indistinguishable part of the poisonous wartime stew called 'lootpillagelandrape'," *how, where, and why* sexual assault occurs is important to comprehending women's experiences in ethno-nationalist war (Enloe 2000: 108).

In analysing traditional conceptions of "peace," women's lives are frequently relegated to the "private sphere" and ignored (Enloe 2014: 1-18). Thus, for women experiencing violence in Nagorno-Karabakh, a frozen conflict may in fact be searingly active. The motives driving sexual assault are explanatory in how the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and its legacy has unfolded, and in contesting its "frozen" nature.

The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh¹ presents a quagmire of crime and causality; there are myriad competing narratives of the conflict, though a common complaint is the fundamental clash between an Armenian myth-symbol complex emphasising fears of genocide and an Azeri one emphasising territorial integrity (Kaufman 2001: 49). Each therefore saw Karabakh as vital to national existence and its loss as threatening group extinction, leading to nationalist extremism which erupted into war around 1988 (Ibid.: 50).

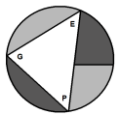
Notwithstanding other interpretations, I concentrate on gender-based



violence, which is theorised uniquely within the region's ethno-nationalist tangle. I am however restricted by underdeveloped research owing to cultures of silence, intentionally biased information², and recent changes in the political climate normalising, and even legalising, GBV in the South Caucasus (Avetisyan *et al.* 2018).

One activist working with the women's rights organisation *Kvinna till Kvinna* explained that survivors of sexual violence are often forced to leave Nagorno-Karabakh to avoid being stigmatised "as a source of shame by neighbors and society;" conversely, perpetrators are rarely punished (*Kvinna till Kvinna* 2019: 28). Although unreported cases make determining the problem's scope difficult, the existing information paints a grim picture where GBV has been pervasive within the conflict (Bastick *et al.* 2007: 115). Events such as the 1988 Sumgait Pogrom, where an Armenian woman was dragged naked through the streets, "cotton buses" which took poor women to military bases for prostitution, and extensive wartime abuse evidence often-public violence intended to harm and humiliate women (Rettman 2017; *Kvinna till Kvinna* 2019: 27).

Though these public forms of GBV capture the greatest international attention, rape in ethno-nationalist war represents two sides of the same coin, where soldiers harm enemy women in their enemies' homes, and concurrently their own women in their own homes. While such wartime domestic abuse is interrelated to martial rape as a method to re-masculinise the soldier's male identity and re-establish ethnic dominance at home, rape within the family extends beyond the scope of this article and thus I choose to focus on examining the attack on the "other" (Borer 2009: 1172).

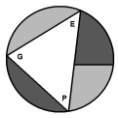


As much as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is territorial, it is also ethnic; the conflict is widely regarded as resting on “mutually exclusive conceptions of the ethnic territory” and a desire to alter prevailing ethnic demographics (Yamskov 1991: 638-644). Multiple fractured identities entailing significant overlap in geography, culture, and language alongside the dissolution of the USSR helped to evoke a condition of ontological insecurity which drove the outbreak of violence, frequently against women.³

This gender-based violence took aim in attacking women both as the *ethnic womb* (the guardian of the ethnic bloodline) and the *symbolic hearth* (the guardian of the ethnic home). In doing so, men were able to degrade the other’s ethno-nationalist conception as a whole, and thus make ideological gains in the conflict. In this sense, the physical attack against a woman became a symbolic act against an entire identity.

Here, sexual violence in Nagorno-Karabakh served to redress the anxiety created by ontological insecurity by physically and symbolically asserting dominance over another’s identity in times of ethnogeopolitical instability. The structure of this essay will build as follows: first, I argue that ontological insecurity resulted from unclear territorial/ethnic claims which intensified during and after the dissolution of the USSR and which in turn sparked violence. Second, I theorise that sexual violence became a weapon against women as the *ethnic womb* and the *symbolic hearth*. Finally, I apply my theoretical framework to three incidents of GBV during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Sexual assault happens in manifold contexts and for manifold reasons,



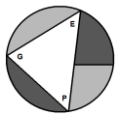
and I do not intend to explain every instance or aspect of GBV, but rather to posit identity insecurity in Nagorno-Karabakh as a unique lens through which to explain martial rape.

Identity, Belonging, Conflict and Violence

Identity is itself slippery; though identity exhibits both constancy and flux side by side, it is the bedrock of “defining and locating our individual selves in the world” (Smith 1991: 17-18). Thus, it is tenuously held yet fiercely defended. This weak grasp or constancy, redoubled by the South Caucasus’ sheer variety of cultural and ethnic differences and unstable boundaries, inevitably created a “political Charybdis” in which cultures and ethnicities are pitted against one another (Ibid.: 18).

The 2005 Nagorno-Karabakh census lists more than three spoken languages in the region, and an ethnopolitical map counts more than eight ethnic groups living in the surrounding area (see Table 1, Map 1). Furthermore, the USSR’s rapid imposition of forced ethnic harmony in the 1920s and its later revoke thereof as the USSR collapsed in 1991, threw already-fractured ethnicities onto the battlefield (De Waal 2003).

These two factors, the burden to differentiate and the USSR’s dissolution, created a condition of ontological insecurity which drove discrimination of the negative, feared outgroup to reassert one’s own positive, embraced ethnic identity, sparking violence. Though it would be exaggerating to deduce a sense of common ethnicity from the fear of extinction by an outgroup alone, the role of warfare is a “crucible of ethnic cohesion” which mobilises nationalist sentiments, ultimately



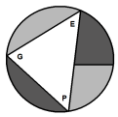
elucidating the trajectory of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (De Waal 2003: 27).

This essay hinges on three overarching assumptions about ethnic identity. First, that the “ethnie,” or idealised ethnic community, is discursively constructed through *difference*, whereby identity comprises a meaning-making process that symbolically constructs itself in relation to others (Castells 1997: 7; Shahnazarian & Ziemer 2012: 1669-1670). Fostering inclusion in ethno-nationalism also necessitates parallel exclusion to define “us” versus “them” (Murer 2014: 295).

Second, self-identification occurs by symbolically identifying the motivations of social actors within everchanging political, historical, and cultural settings (Brubaker & Cooper 2000: 14). During war, people build a positive self-concept distinct from other comparatively negative identities (Tajfel & Turner 1979: 33-47). Thus, social identity becomes the part of an individual’s self-concept which “derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group ... together with the value and emotional significance” thereof (Tajfel 1981: 255).

Third, identities are lenses through which we process our surroundings (Somers & Gibson 1994: 59). It is through these daily narratives that we “make sense of the social world” and form our identities (Ibid.: 38). Therefore, one’s identity is integral to one’s *belonging* within a community and to attaching meaning to our lives.

If belonging is about the security being ‘in place’ provides, a *lack* of identity suggests a lack of security, which Kinnvall terms ontological insecurity (Yuval-Davis *et al.* 2005: 526; Valentine *et al.* 2009: 246;

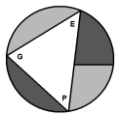


Kinnvall 2004: 755). Ontological security refers to a “person’s fundamental sense of safety in the world,” including a basic “trust of others” necessary to “maintain a sense of psychological well-being and avoid existential anxiety” (Giddens 1991: 38-39).

Identity herein sustains a “narrative about the self and [answers] questions about doing, acting, and being” by re-establishing previous identities or formulating new ones (Kinnvall 2004: 746-747; Giddens 1991: 38-39). Since identity is tied to ‘historical memories’ of the homeland within the family’s household, ontological security is maintained when home can provide a site of constancy relating to permanence and continuity (Smith 1991: 21-23).

In other words, home is a secure base on which identities are constructed (Dupuis & Thorns 1998: 28). When the security of home is lost, as in conflict, then a new home—or a new identity—for ontological security is sought. As Sigel notes, humans harbour a powerful drive to maintain “a sense of [identity] continuity that allays fear of ... being changed against one’s will” (1989: 459). One main response to such insecurity is to reassert one’s (self-)identity by drawing closer to any collective which can reduce insecurity and existential anxiety (Kinnvall 2004: 741). Ontological insecurity thus gives rise to politics of resistance, violence, and the re-assertion or growth of local identities to re-establish psychological *belonging* (Ibid.: 747).

In the 1988-1994 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, ontological insecurity followed two conditions: the burden of differentiation against unclear territorial/ethnic claims and the Soviet identity’s and state’s tumultuous dissolution. As the “narcissism of small differences” suggests, closely



related communities with adjacent borders are more likely to engage in conflict due to hypersensitivity to details of differentiation (Freud 1991: 131).

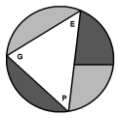
Indeed, table 1 and map 1 illustrate that the South Caucasus is overwhelmed by different languages, ethnicities, and populations, leading to increased tension to distinguish *who is who* within a relatively small geographical and cultural space (Brown 1984: 603-623). In a 2009 interview with Ulrike Ziemer, a woman named Karina claimed that:

“In Karabakh, they called us ‘*galma*’, and in Armenia they scolded us for speaking in Russian and not Armenian” (Shahnazarian & Ziemer 2014: 33).

As this interview excerpt indicates, language variations contribute to everyday marginalisation and prejudice regarding Nagorno-Karabakh (Shahnazarian & Ziemer 2014: 33).

Within Armenian identity, there are also Yerevan Armenians (ethnic Armenians from Armenia) and Baku Armenians (ethnic Armenians from Azerbaijan), as well as many intermarriages which muddle the line between *us* and *them*, augmenting ontological insecurity (United States Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration 1993: 11-12).

On top of this, regional dimensions such as common cultures, ethical and behavioural similarities, common mythology and ancestral heroes, and collective historical memory can both connect and divide “the face of Caucasian nationality” (Ilyasov 2013: 10-13). Religious identity, varied as it is throughout the Caucasus, is a powerful mobiliser of national



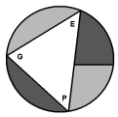
identity and can become a divisive tool to distinguish local peoples from one another when ontological security is threatened, such as during mutually exclusive claims to an ethnic homeland like Nagorno-Karabakh (Ibid.: 11-13). When cultures are similar and small populations are interspersed closely, identity can fracture and thus must be defined more ardently (Brown 1984: 603-623).

Furthermore, the USSR's sweep through the South Caucasus in the 1920s overlaid an additional veil of identity which complicated pre-existing regional identities. For a period, one could be Soviet and Azeri and Karabakhi, amongst other roles.⁵ The Soviet policies of ethnic harmonisation, redrawing borders disregarding ethnic communities, and 'russification', fundamentally altered the identity landscape while suppressing conflict; hence, it proved unsurprising when Armenian and Azeri nationalism grew after the USSR began to disband and fragment around 1988 (Liu 1998: 76-79; Shahnazarian & Ziemer 2012: 1671-1672).

In many ways, ethno-nationalism was "built into" the organisation of socialism, "manifesting itself differently in different countries but absent from none" (Verdery 1993: 174). When the USSR dissolved, an entire facet of the region's identity—alongside important government structures, cultural practices, borders, and hierarchies—disappeared nearly overnight. The Soviet identity and consequent pressure to harmonise was stripped from South Caucasians, triggering ontological insecurity.

Ontological Insecurity and Violence

To rectify the ontological insecurity galvanised by ethnic/border anxiety

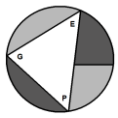


and the USSR's dissolution, *ethnies* must re-assert their claim to ethnicity over another's, therefore defining by contrasting. Social Identity Theory (SIT) propositions that people construct their intergroup identity by attaching emotional significance which builds self-esteem; people therefore cultivate a positive conception of the "ingroup" against the "outgroup," creating inherent competition (Tajfel 1982: 13-19).

Experiments by Tajfel and Turner found that simply assigning children to groups inspired discrimination against the outgroup, as members tend to view competitors negatively so as to increase their own self-esteem through "positive distinctiveness" (1979: 33-47).

One means of buttressing positive distinctiveness (thereby legitimising identity) is by reifying the social hierarchy by dominating the outgroup through *violence*. Bielby and Murer explain that 'doing' violence is part of 'doing' our identity, making violence "a generative force" (Bielby & Murer 2018: 3). Identity is furthermore performative—we perform ritualised and codified acts to signify our belonging to a group (Butler 1999: 173-174). By 'doing' violence against an outgroup, we re-perform fantasised acts of perpetration to reconfigure the self, thereby concretising the threatened identity (Bielby & Murer 2018: 3-4).

Therefore, the physical attack against an outgroup symbolically attacks the latter's self-conception. By committing violence, especially killing, the vulnerable individual demonstrates membership by 'doing' exclusion (Bielby & Murer 2018: 3-4). Thus, "to be recognized as a member of the collective self it may be necessary to violently debase the other" (Murer 2014: 314).

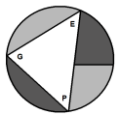


Therefore, the suicide bomber who literally diffuses himself over his victim symbolically dominates the other's ethnic identity with their own, re-performing their idealised status hierarchy. This mirrors the 1994 bombing of Bagratashen by Baku Azeris and Azerbaijan's "suicide drones," which aim not just to kill, but to performatively disintegrate their ethnic body to disrupt the outgroup's social stability (*Los Angeles Times* 1994; Sanchez 2016).

Additionally, where identity performances demonstrate group membership, performative violence wins social capital that translates into *belonging* within the *ethnie*—even for suicide bombers beyond the grave (Murer 2014: 294-297; Bourdieu 1985: 728-729). These symbolic purposes—to dominate and to belong—amalgamate to redress ontological insecurity through physical violence.

Utilising SIT, violence in Nagorno-Karabakh mollifies ontological insecurity motivated by unclear territorial/ethnic claims and the USSR's dissolution. As Druckman explains: "membership in [an ethnic group] becomes part of the individual's self-identity and critical to a sense of self-worth" (1994: 49). When this self-worth is threatened, members of the group reify their identity through exclusion and discrimination, ultimately leading to violence aimed at legitimising the idealised status hierarchy in order to achieve positive distinctiveness.

Though the development of social identity does not inherently produce violence, the outgroup discrimination it engenders primes us for violence when amplified by boundary-making rhetoric premised on the threatening image of the "other." In this way, physical violence spawns a symbolic crutch for a fractured identity.



Gendered Violence and Ethnic Identity

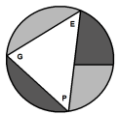
Gendered Violence: Masculinity as a Performance

Masculinity, like ethnicity, performs identity: one acts out internalized, embedded and normalised signs to signify belonging to a gender (Butler 1999: 185). During conflict, the militarised is masculinised and vice versa. Enloe suggests the process of militarization works to preserve society's (martial) hierarchies of identities (2000: 261; Birkedal 2018: 43-45).

Notions which are constitutive to militarisation as a project—masculinity/femininity, honor, and heroism—are constructed through cultural practices dependent on performance. These performances help construct the “masculine self” by reaffirming socialised gender norms in line with *hegemonic masculinity*.

Such gender norms, inherited from the Ancient Grecian ideal of the “citizen-warrior,” generally consist of acting out critical values which help to retain the patriarchal status hierarchy—aggression, courage, violence, etc. (Tickner 2004: 43; Kimmel 1994: 125). Hegemonic masculinity, much like a hegemonic state, differentiates itself by configuring “manhood” around the dominance of men and the subordination of women (Connell 1995: 77; Hooper 2001: 73). Because violence performs “manhood,” boys are praised for being aggressive, especially when such aggression is sexual (Connell 1985: 263).

As Bellini explains: “men must not only reject femininity, but [also] dominate and control women to be men” (2010: 55). Because ‘doing’



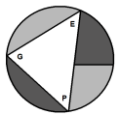
violence and ‘doing’ gender are mutually constitutive performances, violence which seeks to dominate the outgroup is inherently gendered and thus *victims’ gender matters* (Bielby & Murer 2018: 4).

Arguably, the nation cannot be divorced from its ethnic aspect—the nation is foremost a community of common descent. Such militarised hegemonic masculinity equates “manhood” with the ability to defend his nation and thus his *ethnie* (Smith 1991: 13-21). Men are projected to be the “just warriors marching into battle,” while women are the “beautiful souls marching for peace”—innocent of the war yet needing protection (Elshtain 1987).

In the South Caucasus, the *status quo* prescribes men as hero-fighters expected to sacrifice their lives for their nation and thus for their women (Beukian 2014: 254). Within these discourses, women become at once the victims and the causes of war (Elshtain 1992). Women are thereby reduced to a form of traffic: as exchangeable, symbolic property for the primary purpose of cementing bonds with other men (Kosofsky 1985: 34).

When men perform gender-based violence they perform their masculine identity, which through socialised gender norms that portray the man as the ethnic warrior and the woman as the ethnic victim is inherently tied to performing national identity.

Thus, militarised masculinity endorses sexual violence insofar as it performs a codified set of norms which involves dominating both “our” and “their” women and what they represent: the *ethnic womb* and the *symbolic hearth*.

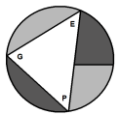


Women as the Ethnic Womb

As I have argued, violence responds to ontological insecurity by dominating one's own identity over another's. This can be further achieved through sexual violence, as hegemonic masculinity directs men to protect their *ethnie* and thus their women, who control the mythified "ethnos of the womb" (Zivkovic 2006: 258; Čolović 2002: 18). Čolović argues that the nation reproduces itself mythically through a "double vascular" system: one transmits the blood through individual biological mothers and the other through the sacrificial blood of fallen heroes which soaks the native lands (2002: 23).

Such logic links the nation to the mother. Women demarcate the ethnic boundaries of an identity as they are tasked with transmitting bloodlines as biological reproducers and cultural traditions as ideological reproducers (Beukian 2014: 252; Yuval-Davis & Anthias 1989: 7-10). Women play such a central role in birthing the nation that linguistically, national symbols are coded as the 'motherland' (*mayrenik*) and 'mother tongue' (*mayr lezou*)⁶ (Beukian 2014: 252).

For Armenian women, motherhood and family-building are perceived as unique Armenian traits distinguishing them from the *otar*, or "other" (Beukian 2014: 249). The particular history of genocide and national struggle has been the burden of women, rendering motherhood a symbolic feature of (self-)identity within the nationalist project (Ibid.: 249). Thus, women as the *ethnic womb* makes gender-based violence (GBV) an egregiously effective tool to degrade the "other;" to attack a woman of another *ethnie* is to literally invade and dominate the *ethnic womb*, disrupting their bloodline: the very basis of ethnic identity.



Martial rape further doubles as ethnic cleansing, where forced pregnancies can undermine family solidarity (Holzner 2011: 42; Card 1996: 7). Whereas rape can be considered an act of patriarchal violence against an individual in the largest sense of sex discrimination, genocidal rape is the systematic rape of women during wartime as a tactic to conquer a people (Connell 1985: 264; Bennett 2002). Even if no pregnancy results, knowledge of the rape is sufficient to alter cultural and generational solidarity (Card 1996: 7-8).

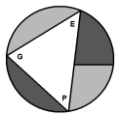
Mirroring the logic of the suicide bomber, the act of ejaculation in genocidal rape becomes a symbolic means to assert and insert one's own identity onto and into another. She is left with a degraded feeling that she has lost control over her body and identity (Seifert 1996: 55).

Symbolically then, to rape the ethnic woman is to rape the entire ethnicity. In this way, one can reify their own identity by enforcing the patriarchal status hierarchy and dismantling the other's clarity of "self" (Bourdieu 1985: 728-729).

This violence also works to emasculate the "father" role of the male enemy in a biological sense by attaining control over "women's [reproductive] rights," thereby fracturing ethnic boundaries (Borer 2009: 1172). Ultimately, GBV functions to redress ontological insecurity by dominating the *ethnic womb*, and thus the *ethnie* of the "other", both on the battlefield and at home.

Women as the Symbolic Hearth

Since the images of Greek goddess Hestia and her vestal virgins, women



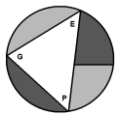
have been depicted tending to the home's hearth (Jennings 2008: 208-214). Even today, women are synonymous with “guardians of the hearth and carers of the home” (Dudwick 1997: 237; Enloe 2014: 177-178).

South Caucasians often picture the family as a “fortress”—the man the “outer wall” defending against danger, and the woman the “inner wall” preserving domestic order (Dudwick 1997: 235-249). She, imagined at home baking bread and rearing children, further takes on the role of the *symbolic hearth* herself as the warm and familiar center of the domicile. She becomes the bastion of ethnic identity which passes down myths and traditions, fostering the nest wherein family identity grows (Smith 1991: 11-14; Beukian 2014: 252).

Men are also idealised as the external defenders of the hearth in Caucasian culture (Beukian 2014: 252). As Nagel highlights: “the real actors in nationalist productions are men defending their freedom, their honor, their homeland and their women” (2003: 159). However, just as home is something to defend, it is also something to attack: the domicile becomes targeted in war, as it and its inhabitants (the ‘womenandchildren’) represent the vulnerable interior of ethnic identity (Sjoberg & Gentry 2007: 3).

Sexual assault makes the “private” “public,” breaching the walls of the home and destabilising the symbolic hearth, leaving the house to crumble around it. But, even after rape a woman does not gain the right to her own pain; indeed, it is the man “in charge” of her who is the target (Heit 2009: 364).

To rape a woman is to symbolically, and sometimes physically, breach



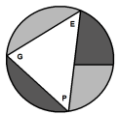
the “outer wall” the man presents, emasculating both his masculine and ethnic identities through his women. Thus, sexual assault becomes a tactic to assert distinctiveness over the “other” by invading the pedestaled “home” and attacking the *symbolic hearth*.

The Mother Maketh the Nation

In ethno-nationalist war, there exists a sentiment that “when we lose the *mothers* to the dark side, all is lost” (Sjoberg & Gentry 2007: 169). The mother becomes synonymous with the nation, and the motherland synonymous with identity. This leads to a delicate discourse where women shape men’s identity, becoming inherently vulnerable yet indispensable to the nationalist project (Zivkovic 2006: 259). Hooper suggests that gender roles in warfare prescribe women as victims of the enemy’s fighting so men can battle in their defense (2001: 82; Sjoberg and Gentry 2007: 171-173).

While women in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict do play the victims war is *fought for*, they dually play “essential targets for the attainment of ethnic purity or the corruption of the purity of the opponents’ ethnicity” as well (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007: 172). In her roles as the *ethnic womb* and the *symbolic hearth*, the woman becomes an intermediary for men to attack the other nation and assert the idealised status hierarchy.

Thus, wartime rape in ethno-nationalist conflict may be construed as a means to redress ontological insecurity. In understanding sexual violence as a gendered performance of identity, we must recall that gender is diverse and hybridised and consequently, performative rape



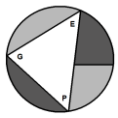
takes meaning fluidly as conflict evolves. In the next section, I will apply a gendered lens to three cases of GBV during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Sexual Violence within Nagorno-Karabakh

Claudia Card contends: “if there is one set of fundamental functions of rape, civilian or martial, it is to display, communicate, and produce or maintain *dominance*” (1996: 7). Much of the conflict-driven GBV demonstrated this purpose by performing gendered norms to signify positive distinctiveness. In attempting to resolve ontological insecurity, sexual violence became a tool to reaffirm the status hierarchy and to consequently dominate the “other.”

Though there are many recorded instances of sexual violence on either side ranging from domestic abuse to mass rapes to the molestation of pregnant women and babies, a lack of international attention to the topic and strong misogynistic cultures which demonise survivors have stifled large-scale reporting (*Kvinna till Kvinna* 2019; Lee 1988; CEDAW 1997).

However, descriptions of 1988 Sumgait pogrom, the 1990 Baku pogrom and the 1992 Khojaly massacre consistently describe mass rapes and mutilations taking place (De Waal 2003; Lee 1988; CEDAW 1997). A 1997 report from the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) records pregnant Armenian women and babies being molested, little girls being raped in front of their parents, and Christian crosses being burned on women’s backs



during the Baku pogrom (CEDAW 1997). Furthermore, a survivor of the Khojaly massacre claims he witnessed Armenian forces torture and rape women and children throughout the invasion (Girit 2017).

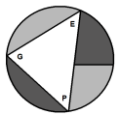
In lieu of presenting a comprehensive description of the atrocities, I will instead apply this theoretical framework to three specific cases: the Sumgait Pogrom, a gang rape of two Azeri women, and “survival sex” in Armenia.

First, the Sumgait Pogrom may be the war’s most infamous example of sexual violence. Following Nagorno-Karabakh’s attempted merger with Armenia in early 1988, violent riots broke out in Sumgait—an Azeri township 32 kilometers off Baku—which quickly became littered with gang rapes, molestations, and attacks on Armenian women and children (Dash 1989: 72-73). Speaking to a crowd of 300 in a Moscow churchyard, one man remembered:

“[I] saw a pregnant woman who had been hacked to death, her womb slashed open and the unborn baby mutilated ... other people had their ears and fingers cut off” (Dash 1989: 73).

Another Soviet journalist watched an Armenian girl burned alive; her charred torso was later dragged and mutilated on the street (Dash 1989: 73). Karen Matevosyan, a retired policeman living in Stepanakert, further recalls the lynching of a naked woman during the “three days of hell”:

“The bandits came to their flat and beat him [her husband] and left him for dead, but he wasn’t dead. They raped her and then they



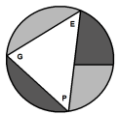
dragged her by her hair down the stairs from the fifth floor to the ground floor and chased her through the streets” (Rettman 2017).

These public attacks against women represent a symbolic degradation of the *ethnic womb* and humiliation of their protector-men, wherein the sexuality of women is destroyed (sometimes burned) to send a message of dominance to female survivors and the men socially connected to them (Card 1996: 7).

Additionally, mutilating a pregnant woman and her unborn child serves as ethnic cleansing by physically destroying her fertility as a means of murder and emasculating the father’s defender role (Beukian 2014: 252). This further acts as symbolic domination of her ethnic identity by invalidating her motherhood. Dragging her from her husband’s home moreover evokes the image of the *symbolic hearth* by physically and symbolically invading the domicile and its tie to family identity.

Second, HG 7, an 81-year-old Azeri man, recounted during a 1994 Human Rights Watch interview in Baku his experience being beaten and kidnapped by Armenian soldiers (Panico 1994: 58-60). He fled Hoje, Azerbaijan, alongside four men, an older woman, and a young woman carrying a two-day-old dead infant whose burial had been interrupted by the Armenian attack. The captives were held in a wooden shack with a dirt floor and fed only once in two days; here, Mr. G remembers witnessing the gang rape of the two Azeri women by their captors (Ibid.: 59-60). The old man cried as he recalled the women were raped two to three times daily in front of the male captives:

“The attackers did not pay attention to the shouting or cries of the



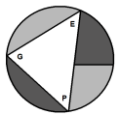
women, nor to the pleas made on behalf of the young woman, age twenty-two, who had just delivered and then lost her first-born child a few days earlier” (Panico 1994: 58-60).

The act of raping the Azeri women in front of male captives can be understood as a weaponised performance illustrating dominance over their identity and masculinity. Furthermore, the rape of a woman after taking her dead child replaces her ethnic progeny with their genetic identity through a possible pregnancy, acting as ethnic cleansing, which attempts to address ontological insecurity by dominating and erasing the “other.”

Finally, in discussions with the Swedish women’s organisation *Kvinna till Kvinna*, activists identified sexual exploitation as a component of Armenian military structures; some low-ranking soldiers were expected to “offer their wives sexually” to higher-ranking officers in exchange for privileges (*Kvinna till Kvinna* 2019: 27).

Though it remains unclear whether sex work is an organised practice in the Armenian military or if it simply occurs on an individual basis, women serving as cooks, cleaners, nurses, doctors, and administrative staff have and continue to face sexual pressure from military personnel (*Kvinna till Kvinna* 2019: 27).

Sex became survival in bordering regions and around military bases, where a gynecologist reported that selling sex had become common for impoverished mothers (*Kvinna till Kvinna* 2019: 27). There were repeated reports of buses that recruited women for work in ‘cotton fields’:



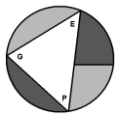
“We know that ‘cotton buses’ are not going to the fields. Women are taken to another region or military base for sex” (*Kvinna till Kvinna* 2019: 27).

This forced prostitution of Armenian women within military structures worked to reify the militarised masculinity complex compounded with men’s ethnic identity. Further, it illustrates the hypocrisy bound tightly to such masculinity complex; while soldiers are charged with the heroic protection of “their women,” they simultaneously rape both enemy women and their own, where both acts help to construct the image of a virile, red-blooded man.

As the vilification of women is often socialised during military training, rape thus reaffirms soldiers’ anti-femininity complex (Seifert 1996: 35-43). This militarised rape fortifies the process of treating women as symbolic intermediaries through which to strengthen and degrade masculinity, such as by trafficking wives to higher-ranking officers.

Just as raping enemy women dominates the other’s ethnic identity, raping one’s own women sends a similar message of male control over the bloodline and community. As Beukian reminds us, masculinity and Armenian identity are linked, and thus the anxiety created by ontological insecurity is redressed by men reasserting their masculine dominance through sexual prowess, simultaneously fulfilled through one’s own women and through the enemy’s (2014: 252-253).

These three examples of sexual violence, though offering only a fragment of the conflict’s atrocities, paint a grim picture where ontological insecurity and masculinised identity were militarised to



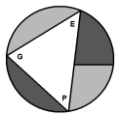
target women in their roles as mothers and guardians. While individual motives behind sexual assault are multifold, rape acts as a cross-cultural language of male domination in a weaponised masculinity-femininity social structure (Card 1996: 6-9). In ethno-nationalist conflict, such domination can be enjoyed for its own sake as well as for ulterior ends such as to reassert or attack ethnic identity.

Conclusion

Just as traditional scholarship tends to be overly simplistic by claiming men's experiences as universal, this essay has been too simplistic by illustrating women as victims and men as patriarchal warriors only. Increasingly, women are recognised as actors, enablers, and even perpetrators of wartime violence, instead of simply as victims (Askin 2003: 513). It is important to note that women played a number of roles in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: as mothers and daughters surely, but also as fighters, activists, and visionaries who impacted the trajectory of the conflict and its aftermath (Shahnazarian 2016).

Gender and conflict are socio-historical processes that are carried out collectively and thus have a collective meaning (Seifert 1996). Such meaning is both localised and specific as well as ever-changing, and while hegemonic masculinity is often dominant, masculinity itself is as varied and fluid as the many roles which men played.

This essay offers one explanation of GBV in Nagorno-Karabakh as a response to ontological insecurity generated by unclear territorial/ethnic claims and the USSR's impact on the identity

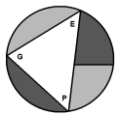


landscape. These fractured identities sought positive distinctiveness by dominating the “other” through women as the *ethnic womb* and the *symbolic hearth*. In a war where men targeted one another, women became both conductors and targets of symbolic nationalism. However, as Hooper reminds us, “masculinities are not just domestic cultural variables but the products of men’s participation in [the greater system of] international relations” (2001: 122).

My argument’s limited focus on the masculinised aspects of conflict rather than on women’s roles, as well as prioritisation of social rather than psychological identity theories opens it to criticism within the overarching discussion of women in war. This is further aggravated by constrained research on GBV in the Caucasian political climate, specifically within Azerbaijan.

This essay does however signify a larger trend in IR: that conceptions of masculinity in war leave women on the periphery, and more specifically, that conceptions of identity cast women as being acted upon, not as actors. In understanding women’s function in men’s (self-)identity, the ideas of “peace” and “war” no longer accurately reflect what women actually experience, illuminating that for women experiencing the socio-cultural consequences of gendered violence in Nagorno-Karabakh, a frozen conflict might be frighteningly hot.

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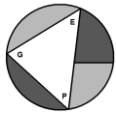


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Endnotes

1. Also called Artsakh by ethnic Armenians.
2. Anna Sarkisyan (2014) claims that Karabakhi women suffered essentially no GBV during the conflict, illustrating how even current, international sources misrepresent the violence's scope.
3. For clarity, I employ a binary approach to gender, though recognising the existence of genders outside the heteropatriarchy.
4. Turkic for “newcomers”.
5. As Smith argues, the self is composed of multiple identities and roles which frequently overlap and reinforce one another, including familial, territorial, class, religious, ethnic, and gender (1991: 13-18).
6. Armenian terms.
7. Anonymised.

NB: do you have any comments on Webster's article? Please send these to info@ethnogeopolitic.org or by contact form at www.ethnogeopolitics.org.



Supporting Data

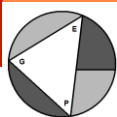
Table 1: Nagorno-Karabakh Census (2005)

Աղյուսակ 5.2 Մշտական բնակչությունը (քաղաքային, գյուղական) ըստ ազգության և լեզուների
 Table 5.2 De Jure Population (Urban, Rural) by Ethnicity and Languages
 Таблица 5.2 Постоянное население (городское, сельское) по языкам и национальности

Լեռնային Ղարաբաղի Հանրապետություն
 Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh
 Нагорно-Карабахская Республика

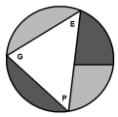
Աղյուսակ 5.2
 Table 5.2
 Таблица 5.2

Ազգությունը Ethnicity Национальность	Ընդամենը Total Всего	Մայրենի լեզուն Mother tongue Родной язык			
		Հայերեն Armenian Армянский	Ռուսերեն Russian Русский	Ուկրաիներեն Ukrainian Украинский	Այլ լեզու Other language Другой язык
ԸՂՀ NKR НКР	137737	136366	1274	7	90
Հայեր Armenians	137380	136194	1128	0	58
Արմյե Армяне					
Ռուսներ Russians	171	63	106	0	2
Русские					
Ուկրաիներեն Ukrainians	21	5	9	7	0
Украинцы					
Այլ Other	165	104	31	0	30
Другие					
Քաղաքային Urban	70512	69423	1027	5	57
Городское					
Հայեր Armenians	70318	69344	937	0	37
Армяне					
Ռուսներ Russians	94	29	63	0	2
Русские					
Ուկրաիներեն Ukrainians	16	5	6	5	0
Украинцы					
Այլ Other	84	45	21	0	18
Другие					
Գյուղական Rural	67225	66943	247	2	33
Сельское					
Հայեր Armenians	67062	66850	191	0	21
Армяне					
Ռուսներ Russians	77	34	43	0	0
Русские					
Ուկրաիներեն Ukrainians	5	0	3	2	0
Украинцы					
Այլ Other	81	59	10	0	12
Другие					



Map 1: *Yerevanci* (2003)





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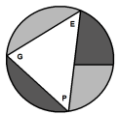
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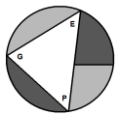
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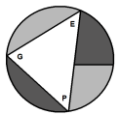
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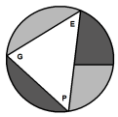
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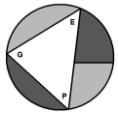
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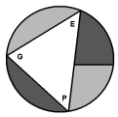
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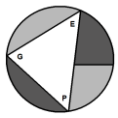
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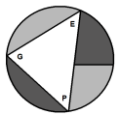
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