

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Security, peace and development: Unpacking discursive constructions of wartime rape and sexual violence in Syria**

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**The ‘rape-as-a-weapon’ of war narrative has been particularly influential in the securitization of sexual violence. Drawing upon ideas about the fetishization of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV), this article unpacks the language used within this security paradigm. Using an original case study, discourse analysis is used to unpack how policymakers, activists and the news media construct a ‘truth’ about rape and sexual violence committed in Syria. It is argued that the international political economy of this conflict is being obscured by a biopolitical security agenda that prioritizes CRSV. The foreign policy implications of this security narrative are reviewed within the broader context of International Peace and Development. Using secondary data analysis, this study examines how gendered dimensions of the Syrian conflict interact with global economic and local state/military practices to; reinforce existing patterns of violence against women and girls and expose them to new forms of gender-based violence. Analyzing concepts such as ‘rape-as-a-weapon of war’ and terms such as ‘widespread’ and ‘systematic’, findings suggest that the selective focus on wartime rape and sexual violence in Syria, particularly by extremist groups, precludes an understanding of the complexities of conflict violence and impedes efforts to eliminate it**

**Key words:** Biopolitics, conflict-related sexual violence, discourse analysis, rape-as-a-weapon of war, securitization, Syria, peace and development.

## **INTRODUCTION**

“It is a myth that rape is an inevitable part of conflict.” This is a statement that was made by Angelina Jolie (UN special envoy) at the Global Summit to end Sexual Violence in Conflict (Jolie, 2014). This statement can be placed within existing research and policy discourse that

tell us two things:

- (1) Wartime rape and sexual violence are politicized and prioritized within International Security (IS) and
- (2) Women (and children) are singled out as particularly

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at risk of such violence (Aoláin, 2016; George and Shepherd, 2016; Puechguirbal, 2010; Shepherd, 2015; United Nations Security Council Resolutions UNSCR 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2013. See also the special issue of *International Political Science Review* that examines the localization and implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda). This two-part message is produced in numerous media, policy and advocacy materials. That wartime rape and sexual violence are considered a threat to global peace and security is not new: UNSCR 1820 (2008) identifies rape and sexual violence during armed conflict as a war crime and a threat to the safety of civilians as well as international peace and security. What is new is the characterization of this violence as reaching a new juncture typified by catastrophic new trends of extremist groups using such violence as a tactic of terror (UN Security Council, 2015). In addition to unpacking the language of this security framework, this article draws attention to recent accounts that sensationalize and objectify war crimes perpetrated by terrorist 'others' in Syria.

Inspired by poststructural and postcolonial perspectives, feminist scholarship within International Relations (IR) has drawn attention to structural inequalities and divisions between the Global North and the Global South (Agathangelou and Turcotte, 2015; Doty, 1996; McKinnon, 2016; Mohanty, 1988; Olivius, 2016a, 2016b; Saleh, 2016; Spivak, 1988; Steans, 2013). This work has highlighted the inherent ethnocentrism and "occidentalism" (Brunner, 2016, p.383) within hegemonic (read western) discourses - and knowledge production more generally - around peace, development and global security. As we have seen in both the US-led interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, the ostensible rescue narrative of "white men saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak, 1988, p.92) was, on closer inspection, part of a US orientalist pursuit to remasculinise the American empire following the attacks of 9/11 (Banwell, 2015).

Both projects had disastrous consequences for civilians in these countries. Relying on similar western foreign policy rhetoric, based on narrow accounts of sexual violence; particularly when committed by extremist groups (however horrific) would be equally shortsighted. A more measured and nuanced account will address the range of violence (both interpersonal and structural) committed during this conflict. It is worth noting at the outset that this work is not suggesting that victims' accounts of rape and sexual violence are not credible or that this topic is not worthy of attention. The goal of this study is to address the implications of disproportionality focusing on rape and sexual violence.

### Objectives of the study

The problem, as identified earlier, is the securitization of rape and sexual violence. Using a case study analysis of the on-going conflict in Syria, this article engages in a

poststructural analysis of the language used when discussing rape and sexual violence within global policy, advocacy and news media. The approach taken in this piece moves beyond an analysis that simply focuses on UN policy and practice. This study includes the work of the UK government's Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative (PSVI) (created by William Hague and Angelina Jolie) and statements made at the Global Summit to end Sexual Violence in Conflict. Drawing upon discursive representations of sexual violence perpetrated against civilians in Syria – in particular women and girls, as this forms the basis of most reports on this subject - this article analyses how the international political economy (PE) of this conflict has been obscured by a securitization agenda that prioritizes rape and sexual violence. Briefly, a key element of the feminist PE method is the emphasis it places on the local and global contexts in which violence (particularly violence against women and girls VAWG) occurs. By addressing structural forms of inequality and violence, it broadens what is meant by violence and abuse.

Meger's (2016b) work on the fetishization of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) is based on the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (see also Mertens and Pardy, 2017). At the end of her discussion she warns that this tendency - to rely on media and policy reports that sensationalize and objectify sexual violence within a particular security framework - is being played out in accounts of atrocities perpetrated in ISIS-controlled areas of the Middle East. To date no research examining this phenomenon in the context of Syria exists. Whilst Meger (2016a, 2016b) refers to the implications of the fetishization of CRSV for aid and policy regimes in the DRC, a detailed analysis and concrete examples are missing from her work. This piece provides specific and detailed examples of how this securitization agenda informs how funds are mobilized; focusing on aid and resource distribution in Syria.

While there is no denying that the crimes being committed against civilians in Syria are serious and require international attention and humanitarian aid, a number of writers are concerned about the selective focus on rape at the expense of other forms of atrocities perpetrated in Syria (Alsaba and Kapilashrami, 2016; Crawford et al., 2014; Meger 2016a, 2016b. For selective reporting of wartime rape more generally see Cohen et al., 2013, Hirschauer, 2014). Chulov (2017) cites an Amnesty International report claiming that 13,000 of Bashar al-Assad opponents were secretly hanged in Saydnay prison in Syria. In addition, we are informed that thousands more died through torture and starvation in the prison. Despite news reports such as this – which draw attention to the range of atrocities committed in war zones – Crawford et al. (2014) argue that, on the whole, media narratives follow a typical pattern: "they are selective and sensationalist; they obscure deeper understandings about patterns of

wartime sexual violence; and they are laden with false assumptions about the causes of conflict rape”.

To elaborate, the problem with such reporting is that over-estimating the problem can mean that accurately reported levels of wartime rape seem minor by comparison; it also, as they point out, marginalizes other forms of wartime sexual violence, as well as other forms of violence and Gender-based Violence (GBV) (Crawford et al., 2014). As Alsaba and Kapilashrami (2016) point out - with specific reference to women - the spectrum of violence Syrian women and girls have been subjected to is wide-ranging. Indeed, in the context of a deeply patriarchal society, women's increased participation in public life (resulting from the absence of their husbands due to the conflict) leaves them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation (Human Rights Watch (HRW), 2014; UNHCR, 2015; Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), 2016). This includes: kidnapping and abduction to extract information (FIDH, 2012; WILPF, 2016); forced recruitment by Kurdish militias (WILPF, 2016); forced detention (FIDH, 2012) and, the forced disappearance and detention of female political activist, including female members of families of male activists (HRW, 2014; WILPF, 2016).

The Syrian government also detained women in order to trade them for the weapons of armed opposition groups (WILPF, 2016). Women have also been executed, tortured and enslaved; denied access to fair trials and, denied access to healthcare (Alsaba and Kapilashrami, 2016; Universal Periodic Review, 2016). The deliberate targeting of schools also has implications for GBV. The Syrian Network for Human Rights reports that 1000 schools were turned into detention and torture centers (WILPF, 2016). This, and the use of explosive weapons in civilian populated areas, compromises girls' access to education and leads to other abuses including early and forced marriage as fathers force their daughters to marry. This is done in order to provide their daughters with economic stability (WILPF, 2016). Indeed, there are many reports of early and forced marriage being used to alleviate extreme poverty among Syrian girls (Human Rights Council, 2016; Inter-agency, 2013; The Freedom Fund, 2016; Spencer et al., 2015). A more detailed discussion will follow.

With regards to boys and men, research conducted by ABAAD, in conjunction with UNICEF (2013) found that they too are victims of GBV in Syria or in their new host communities. This includes domestic violence; harassment based on gender; and, forced and early labor. Due to patriarchal understandings of men's roles as economic providers, forcing young boys into work is considered a form of GBV. In addition, siege and starvation are used as weapons against civilians by both the Syrian government and opposition-armed groups (WILPF, 2016). These examples underscore the complexity of the PE of violence in Syria.

In terms of the erasure of other more common and

complex patterns of violence perpetrated during this conflict, of particular note are western accounts of the abduction, imprisonment and raping of Yazidi women by ISIS (Crawford et al., 2014). This disproportionate focus rape and sexual violence, particularly when carried out by extremist groups, can overshadow less visible forms of violence. Moreover, focusing on ISIS obscures the multiplicity of actors and ideologies that are caught up in the conflict.

Siddiqui (2014) has written about the tendency to single out these attacks by ISIS as barbaric examples of ethnic sexual slavery. It is argued here that such accounts are in danger of invoking both orientalist and ethnocentric interpretations. There is no denying that these stories are disturbing, and yet – aside from the fact that they are not unique – they reproduce a particular western narrative: “forces of evil in the Middle East are using rape as a weapon in terror campaigns against natural allies of “the West”” (Crawford et al., 2014). These issues will be dealt with in more detail in due course. Indeed, focusing on the behavior of combatant's means that intimate partner sexual violence - estimated to be far higher than sexual violence committed by non-civilians - receives less attention (Meger, 2016b; Spencer et al. 2015).

As the conflict intensifies, and frustration levels increase, incidents of domestic violence (DV) have risen (Sami et al., 2013; The International Rescue Committee (IRC), 2013). The WILF (2016) reports that individual small arms, which have proliferated since the beginning of the crisis, pose a great threat to this growing trend in DV, particularly in environments that are characterized by tension and external pressures. The presence of these small arms within the home dramatically increases the likelihood of intimate partner violence resulting in murder (WILPF, 2016).

In addition to these criticisms, reports can also be accused of reproducing heteronormative understandings of victimization. They almost exclusively focus on heterosexual women, obscuring the experiences of males and LGBTI victims (Crawford et al., 2014). It is worth noting that the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Sexual Violence in Conflict (SRSG-SVC), Zainab Hawa Bangura, does acknowledge that boys and men have also been victims of CRSV in Syria, and that individuals are targeted based on their sexuality. Similarly, the 2016 Universal Periodic Review of the Syrian Republic notes that victims of ‘honor’ killings also include LGBT individuals.

Despite these few exceptions, the selective focus on heterosexual female victims speaks to Butler's (1990) concept of gender intelligibility. Her thesis is that bodies do not exist in their own right, but come into being through performing accepted standards of gender intelligibility: “persons' only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility” (Butler, 1990, p.16). Hetero-sexual females, by performing accepted standards of femaleness, are afforded public

concern and attention. Furthermore, treating female victims as a homogenous group is also problematic. As Alsaba and Kapilashrami (2016) point out, during ISIS' reign, while all women living under ISIS-controlled areas faced 'punishments' if they violated the regulatory codes laid down by the group (HRW, 2014; Spencer et al., 2015), empirical analyses place different women (heads of household and unmarried women and girls) at more risk than others. Writers have highlighted the problems with such representations that universalize the experiences of women (Puechguirbal, 2010; Wilcox, 2015). Indeed, poststructural and postcolonial perspectives require that we pursue an intersectional analysis that resists the production of the Third-World-Woman as a monolithic subject (Mohanty, 1988). As we know, inequality and discrimination cut across numerous structural constraints that include, but are not limited to, gender, race, class, clan, caste religion, ethnicity and sexual orientation.

The article begins with a brief overview of the conflict in Syria, before outlining the methodology used in this piece: discourse analysis. This is followed by a review of the literature on CRSV. Drawing on secondary data sources - policy reports, news media and global advocacy - the article analyses the securitization of rape and sexual violence in Syria. It does so by engaging with poststructural feminist perspectives. Particular attention will also be paid to orientalist and ethnocentric interpretations of sexual violence committed by ISIS.

On a broader level, these discursive representations are examined within the context of the international PE of GBV in Syria and the gendered coping strategies employed by civilians as a result. Setting this analysis apart from previous work in this area, this study asks: how do gendered dimensions of the Syrian conflict interact with macro-level economic changes; state-level policy changes (neoliberalism); and, local state, military and militia activities to:

- (1) Reinforce existing patterns of violence against women and girls (VAWG) and
- (2) Expose women to new forms of GBV?

### Case study: Syria

Detailed information regarding the origins, nature and current state of the conflict in Syria are provided in the United Nations (UN) General Assembly reports: *The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic* (hereafter UN commission). What follows, for the purposes of this piece, is a brief overview of the conflict. In 2017 the crisis in Syria reached its sixth year. Despite Russian-sponsored peace talks in Sochi in January 2018, the conflict in Syria continues as illustrated by the recent confrontations between Israel, Syria and Iran.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian

Affairs notes that civilians continue to bear the brunt of the conflict. It estimates that 13.1 million people in Syria require humanitarian assistance. Compounding the situation further, many (3 million) remain trapped in besieged or hard to reach parts of the country. More than half the population has fled their homes, and many have been displaced numerous times. Ian Black cites research carried out by The Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR) that places the death toll at 470,000 in 2015 with 11.5% of the population having either been injured or killed (Black, 2016). The Syrian Network For Human Rights (SNHR) reports that 16,913 civilians were killed during 2016.

The following war crimes have been committed in Syria: murder, torture, rape and enforced disappearances (UN General Assembly, 2013). Men are the primary civilian victims of enforced disappearance, torture and unlawful killing (UN commission, 2015b). In particular, ISIS have been accused of waging a campaign of terror against the civilian population, using public executions and amputations to punish those who do not obey their rules. This includes men, women and children (UN commission, 2015a). Both the Syrian government and ISIS have used toxic chemical weapons. Hospitals and medical facilities have been deliberately targeted. This impedes civilians' access to basic requirements such as food and water (UN General Assembly, 2016).

Inspired by the Arab Spring pro-democracy demonstrations that took place in the southern city of Deraa in 2011, what began as peaceful protests against the government soon escalated into violent confrontation between government forces and armed opposition groups. The complexity of the conflict is attributed to the diversity of the actors involved. According to the US Defence Intelligence Agency there are as many as 1,200 different rebel groups opposing President Assad and the government's army (Schmitt and Mazzetti, 2013). These include groups of rebel fighters, political parties who oppose Assad, and those living in exile that are banned from the country (see O'Bagy 2013 for a more detailed discussion).

Regional and international interventions for both sides of the conflict - in the form of military (arms), financial, material (oil) and political support - have complicated things even further. Opposition forces in Syria received regional support from Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Turkey (Gupta, 2016; Richani, 2016). Billions of dollars have been spent by Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait arming opposition groups, while Turkey supports Islamic groups (ISIS and the Al Nusra Front) who were vying for control of the border-crossing points between Syria and Turkey. It is within these cross-border points that the exchange of stolen goods, money laundering and arms sales have been taking place (Richani, 2016). Turkey has also been used for recruitment and rearmament purposes. As noted by Abboud (2017), the war economy in Syria has facilitated the rise of a new conflict elite. And while these actors do not directly

control militias or armed groups, their financial involvement – specifically transactions and payments that secure the flow of goods and materials into regime areas - contributes to the continuation of the conflict.

International support for those opposing Assad comes from the UK, France and the US. Regional support for the Syrian government comes from Shia militias, including Hezbollah as well as Iraqi and Iranian militias. International support is provided by Russia (Gupta, 2016. See Richani 2016 for a more detailed breakdown of how these various actors have funded opposition groups in Syria). From September 2015 Russia was directly involved in the war. In addition to soldiers on the ground, Russia has carried out airstrikes against opposition groups (Beauchamp, 2017). This complex network of external actors, and their direct role in facilitating and maintaining the conflict, transformed this into a proxy war (Alsaba and Kapilashrami, 2016).

Extremist Jihadist groups, ISIS and the Al Nusra Front (now referred to as Hayat Tahrir al Sham HTS), took advantage of these warring divisions, thus adding a further dimension to the war (Richani, 2016; Shaheen, 2017). In early 2014 Islamic State – known then as IS - began taking over large parts of Iraq. Seizing upon the chaos in Syria they then gained land and power in the Eastern part of the country. As a result Assad and his forces, along with various rebel groups, found themselves fighting a separate conflict against IS. Despite their initial stronghold in Northern and Eastern parts of Syria, IS - now renamed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) - faced resistance from government forces, rebel groups and Kurdish groups. They were also subjected to air strikes from Russia and a US-led multinational coalition. In October 2017 ISIS were defeated in Raqqa. However, the extremist Al-Qaeda-linked group, HTS, who have gained full control of Idlib province (Cockburn, 2017), are currently using 're-radicalization' programmes to recruit fighters from rival extremist groups to mount jihadist attacks (Browne, 2018).

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

In her analyses of North-South relations Doty (1996, p. 2) argues that such relations are "implicated in the production of meanings and identities." Specifically, her work examines how the [Global] South is represented by the [Global] North. By representation she means "the ways in which the South has been discursively represented by policy makers, scholars, journalists and others in the North" (Doty, 1996, p. 2).

The discourses that emerge do "...not refer to the 'truth' and 'knowledge' that the North has discovered and accumulated about the South, but rather the ways in which regimes of 'truth' and 'knowledge' have been produced" (Doty, 1996, p. 2). Following Doty (1996), Shepherd (2015) and Olivius (2016a) this piece employs discourse analysis to reveal the "political implications of dominant discursive constructions" (Olivius, 2016a, p. 57). It sought to identify the ways in which knowledge is produced, structured and then legitimized within security practices and institutions.

As Olivius (2016a, p. 57) points out, discourses not only

comprise language, they are also "embedded in institutions, technical processes, and general ways of working or behaving in a particular context." The work of discourse analysis, Shepherd (2015, p. 890) argues, is to reveal the process through which 'things' - be they "...concepts, organizations, objects or, indeed, subjects - become meaningful." In this vein Doty is interested in how meanings are produced, naturalized and attached to different social subjects and objects (here political/securitized subjects are added to the list). This allows us to question how power is produced, is productive and maintained. The feminist critique of the securitization of CRSV, through a poststructural lens, is well established and will not be repeated here (Hansen, 2015; Steans, 2013).

Utilizing this method, this study explores how rape and sexual violence in Syria have been discursively represented by policymakers, activists and the news media; thereby producing a 'truth' about this conflict that has implications for global peace and development. This piece will analyze how concepts such as 'rape-as-a-weapon of war/weapon of terror' and terms such as 'widespread' and 'systematic' are discursively constructed. With regards to the latter two, this study is interested in how such terminology informs the global security agenda, not with how these terms inform international law or criminal prosecutions. In terms of the securitization of CRSV more broadly, and with specific reference to Syria, the following materials will be analyzed: UN policy reports; UNSCRs that address CRSV; news media; statements made by Angelina Jolie, William Hague, John Kerry and the SRSG-SVC; and, global advocacy. This includes the Stop Rape Now: UN Action against Sexual Violence in Conflict campaign (hereafter UN Action), the Women's Media Centre (WMC) and the PSVI.

In terms of the method of analysis, it is useful to draw upon a Foucauldian interpretation of power. From this point of view, power is not considered a possession; rather it is an economy that is dispersed throughout society, in practices, institutions and technologies (Foucault, 1978, 1977). For Foucault, knowledge is inseparable from power. Inspired by Foucault's work (1978) on biopower and biopolitics, Wilcox (2015, p. 17) argues that contemporary practices of violence are constituted with reference to biopower. Biopolitical violence sees bodies as either populations that must be eliminated or, populations that must be protected. Put simply, biopolitical practices of security are concerned with preserving certain human bodies whilst dealing death and destruction to others.

Drawing upon Butler's work on embodiment, Wilcox (2015) aims to challenge scholars of IR and IS to rethink political subjects in terms of their embodiment. Bodies, she argues, are not pre-political; they come into being through practices of international war and security. Unlike Butler's work on gender and embodiment, where there is a structure that regulates the behavior of individuals, Wilcox argues that: "the power to produce bodies as political subjects is more diffuse" (Wilcox, 2015, p. 10-11). Here political interactions that produce bodies and subjects take place within different power structures and dynamics.

To elaborate, for Butler (1990, p.25) "gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be." This reiterative and citational performance is shaped by discourse. Discourses outline the norms by which a person becomes viable. These norms (relating here to gender and sex) qualify "a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility" (Butler, 1993, p. 2). Applying this thinking to IR, Wilcox (2015) points out that humans, then, are not only vulnerable to violence through their natural bodies: "they also are vulnerable because they exist only in and through their constitution in a social and political world" (Wilcox, 2015, p.167).

Put simply, discourses of human security, in the context of biopolitics, decide which bodies need to be rescued and kept alive (Wilcox, 2015). The goal here is to examine how discursive practices have the power to create particular forms of knowledge

about rape and sexual violence in Syria which, in turn, informs biopolitical practices of violence and global security.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### CRSV

The term 'conflict-related sexual violence' is used throughout the 2015 UN Security Council report of the Secretary General. It encompasses the following:

[R]ape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization and other forms of sexual violence of comparable gravity perpetrated against women, men, girls or boys that is linked, directly or indirectly (temporally, geographically or causally) to a conflict.

Sexual violence is defined by the United Nations Commission of Human Rights (cited by Meger, 2016a, p. 3) as:

[A]ny violence, physical or psychological, carried out through sexual means or by targeting sexuality. This includes rape and attempted rape, forced nudity, sexual mutilation, sexual assault, sexual slavery, sexual torture, forced pregnancy, sexual trafficking, and forcing a person to perform sexual acts.

These definitions provided above should orient the reader to the multiple dimensions to sexual violence during war and the diverse behaviors it encompasses. Yet, as discussed above, both media and policy reports tend to either focus on rape at the expense of other forms of CRSV or, CRSV at the expense of other forms of conflict violence. This creates a hierarchy of victimization, placing rape and sexual violence above all other types of violence. A vast body of scholarship exists highlighting the nuances of CRSV, both in terms of the form it takes and the individuals it targets (Baaz and Stern, 2013; Henry, 2016, 2014; Hirschauer, 2014; Leatherman, 2011; Wood, 2014, 2009).

In her review of 140 scholarly articles Skjelsbæk (2001) comes to the conclusion that the relationship between sexual violence and war is best conceptualized within a social constructionist paradigm. This approach considers not only why women generally are targeted during war, but also why specific groups of women (depending on their ethnic, religious or political background) are at a higher risk of victimization. Her model also accounts for why men are targeted. Skjelsbæk (2001, p. 226-227) identifies the strategic effects of rape as:

- (1) Reaffirming militaristic masculinity (focus is on the perpetrator);
- (2) Attacking the religious/political/ethnic identity of the female (focus is on the victim); and,
- (3) Masculinizing and empowering perpetrators by feminizing the male and/or female victim (focus is on the symbolic interaction between perpetrator and victim).

Space will not permit a more in-depth review of the literature on this topic. Here a brief outline of the two main schools of thought is provided. The first views sexual violence as a by-product of war/armed conflict – an inevitable aspect of warfare (Baaz and Stern, 2013; Cohen et al., 2013; Davies and True, 2015; Fogelman, 2012; Schneider et al., 2015; Wood, 2014). Within this paradigm, CRSV is facilitated by economic, political and gendered conditions and is used to fulfill individual or collective desires.

Conversely, advocates of 'the weapon of war' narrative emphasize the strategic/tactical purpose of this violence (Askin, 2003; Buss, 2009; Card, 1996; Leatherman, 2011; Mackenzie, 2010). Here wartime rape and sexual violence are central to a

regime or policy directive (Waller, 2012). Wartime rape, in cases of ethnic cleansing and genocide, can be used as an ethno-marker and may serve as an attack on the nations' culture of women (Cohn, 2013; Lentin, 1999). And whilst some writers have provided a more critical review of this narrative (Crawford, 2013; Kirby, 2012; Skjelsbæk, 2001), ultimately this rape-as-a-weapon of war paradigm – utilized in large part by both media and policy documents – results in all incidents and types of sexual violence being dealt with under the same security measure (Meger, 2016a). This homogenized view of sexual violence – and its securitization – leads to its fetishisation (Meger, 2016a).

Following on from this it will come as no surprise that sexual violence features in at least 13 Security Council Resolutions passed since 2000. Yet, this policy discourse ignores the gendered socio-economic and socio-political inequalities that shape a persons (mainly women) vulnerability to violence in these settings (True, 2010). Furthermore, as Meger (2016a) points out, CRSV receives more attention than nuclear and biological weapons, terrorism and arms proliferation. To paraphrase Hirschauer (2014, p. 5-6): securitization is the process where a social problem adopts a distinctive security character. This is then validated through a specific existential threat component. Securitization actors – the state, international bodies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the media – are responsible for identifying which groups are existentially threatened by this particular security problem. In this instance, securitization applies an existential threat component to rape and sexual violence. This threat is legitimized through global policy, advocacy and media representations that convince its audience (international institutions, donors and funding bodies) that exceptional and extraordinary measures are required to eliminate this threat.

In her work on the securitization of CRSV, Meger (2016a, 2016b) draws upon Marx's (1867) concept of the commodity fetish to fully explain this phenomenon. The fetishisation of CRSV happens in three phases: first, sexual violence becomes homogenized as a discrete thing, thus it is decontextualized from local/global power relations. By identifying sexual violence as the most dangerous form of violence, it is removed from the continuum of GBV in which it takes place and is generalized across conflict-affected situations (Meger, 2016a). Second, it is objectified within media, policy and advocacy discourses. These inform international security agendas and practices. Third, macro-level objectification impacts local security actors, perpetrators and victims. This stage is also about convincing the relevant audiences of the need for extraordinary measures to combat CRSV (Meger, 2016b).

In addition to the shortcomings listed above, the securitization of CRSV also obscures the root causes of this violence. To redress this writers propose adopting a PE framework to uncover the origins of CRSV (Alsaba and Kapilashrami, 2016; Davies and True 2015; Meger, 2016a; True 2010, 2012). An international PE approach highlights the linkages between the economic, the social and the political. It demonstrates how VAWG, including CRSV, is facilitated at the macro, meso and micro levels. It moves beyond visible and direct acts of violence and coercion to focus on "the material basis of relationships that govern the distribution and use of resources, benefits, privileges, and authority" (True 2012, p.7). This approach does not treat CRSV as an inevitable aspect of masculinity or war (Meger, 2016a; True, 2012). Rather, it unpacks the particular contexts in which this political violence is deployed. It examines how existing gender inequalities are often exploited and exacerbated during times of conflict, often through the use of CRSV but also GBV.

So whilst CRSV, as True (2012) points out, is a significant element of contemporary conflict, sexual violence cannot be isolated to conflict zones. It occurs during peacetime as well (Baaz and Stern 2013; Leatherman, 2011). Examining "society's hierarchy of gender, ethnicity, political and civil rights" (Davies



and True 2015, p.7) in pre-conflict situations will facilitate a better understanding of how and why rape and sexual violence are used during conflict (Alsaba and Kapilashrami, 2016; Leatherman, 2011).

During the 1980s, war, armed conflict and economic crises plagued the Arab region. As a result Syria experienced a reduction in social spending, which eventually led to the collapse of the economy and the withdrawal of public services and subsidies (Alsaba and Kapilashrami, 2016). In response the government adopted the neoliberal model, transferring the control of the economy from the public to the private sphere (Abboud, 2017; Gobat and Kostial, 2016). Following these macro-level economic and state-level policy changes (from 2000 onwards), poverty and unemployment levels increased (Gobat and Kostial, 2016). These changes not only limited women's access to public life, they also resulted in their greater economic dependence on male members of their families (Alsaba and Kapilashrami, 2016). Indeed, prior to the crisis, the political, social and economic landscape for women was characterized by institutional and structural forms of gender discrimination and injustice (Alsaba and Kapilashrami, 2016; WILPF, 2016). Discriminatory laws, particularly the six personal status laws, legitimized GBV against women and girls. This violence included 'honor' killings, forced and underage marriage, DV, sexual harassment and rape (Alsaba and Kapilashrami, 2016; WILPF, 2016).

The conflict in Syria resulted in a continuation and intensification of GBV against women and girls (see the examples listed above), alongside the emergence of new forms of violence and discrimination attributed to the PE of the conflict (forced prostitution, which is discussed below). However, as True (2012) points out, instead of illuminating the political-economic dimensions of CRSV – whilst at the same time addressing other forms of conflict violence – the international security paradigm obscures them and thus undermines its own efforts to combat this violence. To summarize: A PE approach highlights the shortcomings of the 'securitization' framework one, for its lack of understanding of the root causes of CRSV and, two, for overlooking other forms of GBV that feature in the economy of war/conflict. To illustrate this point an example will be provided. What follows is a discussion of the use of survival sex/forced prostitution by women affected by the crisis in Syria. In Syria, women who engage in survival or transactional sex do so to provide for their families. In this sense they are both agents and victims within this conflict. It is worth noting that this 'decision' is arrived at under conditions of extreme economic and social hardship. The information provided here is based upon empirical research carried out by various NGOs.

As well as involving physical violence GBV encompasses institutional/structural violence. Women's lack of access to employment is considered a form of structural violence. Furthermore, forced prostitution is listed as a form of GBV in the Declaration on the Elimination of VAW. When the formal economy collapses it is replaced by an informal/illicit economy. In war zones these consist of three types: coping, combat, and criminal (Peterson, 2009). Coping economies revolve around survival and the social reproduction of families/households. Combat economies are driven by military objectives, involving the funding of fighters and rebel activities. And criminal economies center on profit-making activities, which include (directly or indirectly) supplying and funding conflict activities (Richani, 2016).

Peterson (2009) claims that coping strategies are gendered (see also Banwell, 2015), and whilst her analysis is based on Iraq, we can apply her thesis to the conflict Syria. In Syria, individuals (mainly men) of the various warring factions have resorted to combat and criminal activities. They engage in activities such as: kidnapping (HRW, 2015; UN General Assembly, 2013; WILPF, 2016); trafficking (Freedman, 2016; The Freedom Fund, 2016; WILPF, 2016); economic and aid blockages (HRW, 2014; UN General Assembly, 2015a);

extraction and smuggling of oil (Gupta, 2016; Richani, 2016); trading in weapons (WILPF, 2016) and, the smuggling of women and girls (Freedman, 2016; Human Rights Council, 2016). Here we see how state, military and militia activities are not confined to rape and sexual violence.

Women, on the other hand, are more likely to resort to coping economies, which, in the case of Syria, involves survival sex. In 2015 following the drought (see Gupta, 2016; Richani, 2016) and increasing engagement with neoliberal policies, poverty levels reached 83.5% in Syria, while extreme poverty was estimated at 69.3% (SCPR, 2015). This is concentrated within the conflict zone. As heads of household (in the absence of their husbands), women are forced or coerced into prostitution or forced to provide sexual favors in exchange for food and shelter for themselves and their children (Amnesty International, 2016; Samai, 2013; Spencer et al., 2015; The Freedom Fund, 2016; UNHCR, 2015). Indeed, restrictions on the rights of female refugees to work in host communities, limits their access to formal employment opportunities forcing them into the informal economy (The Freedom Fund, 2016; UNHCR, 2015). For example, many female refugees resorted to survival sex as a form of income to cover increased living costs (rent and accommodation) in Lebanon (The IRC, 2013). As Anani (2013, p.76) notes, with reference to Syria refugees in Lebanon: "sexual exploitation or non-consensual survival sex occurs when women and girls exchange sexual favors for food or other goods, or money to help pay the rent." This type of GBV is not limited to Syrian refugees fleeing to neighboring regions, research has found that Syrian women who escape to Europe face similar risks (Freedman, 2016). Indeed sex work has become a common survival strategy for women in camps around Calais in France (Freedman, 2016). So whilst forced prostitution is included in the definition of CRSV (UN Security Council, 2015) the current securitization agenda fails to unpack the root causes of this GBV.

### **An analysis of UN security council resolutions**

The Security Council is primarily responsible for the maintenance of peace and security. The UNSCRs contain the formal views and will of the UN body. UNSCR 1325, adopted in 2000, was the first to "take special measures to protect women and girls from...rape and other forms of sexual abuse...in situations of armed conflict..." This commitment was reiterated in 2008 with UNSCR 1820 which emphasized "that women and girls are particularly targeted by the use of sexual violence." Such violence is described as reaching "appalling levels of brutality." As well as categorizing wartime rape and sexual violence as war crimes, crimes against humanity, and/or acts of genocide, also noteworthy is the following statement (taken from UNSCR 1820):

[S]exual violence, when used or commissioned as a tactic of war in order to deliberately target civilians or as a part of a widespread or systematic attack against civilian populations, can significantly exacerbate situations of armed conflict and may impede the restoration of international peace and security.

This is reiterated in UNSCR 2106: "acts of sexual violence impede durable peace and security as well as sustainable development." Resolution 1820 states that preventing and responding to CRSV "can significantly contribute to the maintenance of international peace and security." Here all three stages of fetishization are at play:

- (1) Rape and sexual violence are decontextualized and generalized across all conflicts as 'widespread' and/or 'systematic' weapons of war (from a poststructuralist perspective universal truth claims such as this are impossible);
- (2) The violence is objectified as appalling and brutal, constituting

a war crime; and,

(3) An appeal is made to relevant actors to intervene to combat this violence.

On this final point, notwithstanding the £23million already raised by the G8 to address CRSV, in his address at the G8 reception, the former UK Foreign Secretary, William Hague, (Gov.UK, 2013) called for increased contributions from his G8 colleagues to support the global fight against sexual violence in conflict:

I hope that because the consequences of sexual violence in conflict are so grave, so damaging to the fabric of those societies, and have such a profound impact on international peace and security, that we the G8 will be able to unite around sensible and comprehensive action and that then, together, we can persuade other nations to join us as well.

Although UNSCR 1888 passed in 2009 reiterates similar issues raised in the previous resolutions, it also pays particular attention to the notion of populations at risk and the need to “promote full stability” using the help of “experts.” Women and children are afforded “special protection due to the fact that they can be placed particularly at risk” (UNSCR 1888). UNSCR 1889, also passed in 2009, focuses on women’s specific needs in post-conflict situations, drawing attention to their right to humanitarian aid, in particular health services, including sexual and reproductive health. These discourses speak to biopolitical practices of security. In this instance women (those who embody intelligible gender identities), as well as children, are singled out as (civilian) populations that must be protected. They, in particular, are existentially threatened by wartime rape and sexual violence. UNSCR 2106, passed in 2010, is the first resolution to use the phrase CRSV. Again the focus is on the widespread and systematic use of sexual violence in situations of armed conflict. By the time UNSCR 2106 is passed in 2013 boys and men, for the first time, are also recognized as victims of CRSV. Efforts to address the root causes of sexual violence in armed conflict also feature in this resolution and are framed as “central to deterrence and prevention.” However, in subsequent reports no real effort is made to understanding the root causes of this violence and language that decontextualizes and homogenizes this violence prevails.

## RESULTS

### The securitization of rape and sexual violence in Syria

The securitization of CRSV has been reproduced in reports and state communications about rape and sexual violence in Syria. To reiterate: stage one of the fetishization process homogenizes and decontextualizes sexual violence and identifies it as the most dangerous form of conflict violence. Stage two involves the objectification of rape and sexual violence within media, policy and advocacy discourses. Reports by the UN commission (2013) and statements made by the SRS-G-SVC, following her trip to Syria, inform us that: most parties of the conflict have carried out sexual violence with a high degree of sophistication. We are informed that it has been used against men, women, boys and girls (during house searches, at checkpoints, in detention centers) as a tactic of war to punish, humiliate, displace and extract information.

The brutal details of this violence are included (HRW, 2015). Rape is described as ‘widespread’ and ‘systematic,’ falling under the category of crimes against humanity and war crimes. Details of specific rapes, gang rapes and torture against both sexes - adults as well as children, are included. We also learn that “religious and ethnic minorities, as well as the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) individuals...have also been systematically persecuted, sexually tortured and killed”(Un News, 2015). Given earlier criticisms around the tendency for such reports to focus on the experiences of heterosexual female victims, this attention to the victimization of LGBTI individuals is welcome.

Unfortunately though, accounts of such violence seem to only serve the purpose of sensationalism and objectification. Brief, yet gory details of this violence are included. These are not used to underscore how gender and sexuality are exploited in the PE of this conflict; rather they are included for their shock value, once again speaking to the fetishization of CRSV.

Despite claiming that rape and sexual violence are widespread and systematic, the final report of the UN commission recognizes that “under reporting and delayed reporting of sexual violence has rendered any assessment of its magnitude challenging” (UN Commission, 2016, p.16). Indeed many other reports have highlighted that due to the stigma surrounding this violence – resulting in a culture of silence - obtaining accurate figures for the number of victims of CRSV is difficult. Yet, the use of “widespread” and “systematic” continues (The IRC, 2013). The second UN commission of 2014 uses a slightly different tactic. We learn from this report how fear of rape is causing many civilians to leave Syria. According to the IRC (2013) report, fear of rape is so significant that family members resort to marrying off their daughters to ‘protect’ them from rape. In addition, early marriage is used as a means of protecting girls from rape (The IRC, 2013; Spencer et al., 2015) - whilst forced marriage is used to safeguard the honor of daughters already victimized by sexual assault (FIDH, 2012; Save the Children, 2014).

Empirical research highlights how early marriage - a long accepted practice in Syria - has increased since the conflict began. Indeed, child marriage is of particular concern for Syrian girls in refugee communities in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey. For example, Jordan has witnessed the following increase in registered marriages involving girls under the age of eighteen: From 12% in 2011 to 18% in 2012 and, from 25% in 2013 to 32% in 2014 (Girls not Brides, 2017).

As mentioned earlier, the conflict in Syria has diminished employment and livelihood opportunities for civilians within and beyond the conflict zone. In Jordan, lack of employment opportunities for Syrians is also believed to be one of the main motivations for early marriage (Human Rights Council, 2016; Save the Children, 2014; Spencer et al. 2015; The Freedom Fund, 2016; The IRC, 2013; WILPF, 2016).



Despite attempts to provide for and protect their daughters, fathers' use of early and forced marriage is problematic as it involves young girls marrying much older men, thereby increasing their risk of violence, abuse and exploitation (Save the Children, 2014). It also, as highlighted earlier, impedes access to education (UNICEF, 2014; Women's Refugee Commission, 2016 hereafter WRC). Women who enter into marriage at a young age are required to leave school in order to care for their husbands or to begin their childbearing and childrearing responsibilities. These examples are included to highlight the range and complexity of GBV being perpetrated in Syria. This aim is not to diminish the impact rape is having on the civilian population.

The reports analyzed earlier not only set the tone for media coverage of the conflict in Syria, journalists have directly quoted them. For example Phoebe Greenwood published the following in 2013: "the UN has gathered evidence of systematic sexual assault of women and girls by combatants in Syria and describes rape as a 'weapon of war.'" She goes on: "in sprawling camps and overloaded host communities, aid workers report a soaring in the number of incidents of domestic violence and *rampant* sexual exploitation." Other reporters are more cautious. Janine Di Giovanni in her 2013 article reminds us that, despite reports suggesting rape has become an 'epidemic' in 'war-torn Syria' - used as a "deliberate tactic to terrorize and subjugate combatants and civilians"- these are based on unverified accounts and "using terms such as 'mass rape' or 'systematic rape' is dangerous for everyone involved."

Notwithstanding the acknowledgment that men and boys can be victims of CRSV, as demonstrated earlier, UNSCRs tend to highlight women's victimization as requiring special attention. Irigaray (1977, p. 84) draws attention to women's exploitation in exchange operations, specifically referencing sexual, economic, social and cultural exchanges. This study adds political to the list. Although Irigaray addresses women's exploitation specifically by men, her argument - that women are products, used and exchanged as though they were merchandise - can be applied to the discussion here about the fetishization of CRSV. This commodification of women and girls is taking place in Syria. In a statement on rape and sexual violence in Syria, and reminiscent of UNSCR 1889, the SRSG-SVC singles out women and girls as those "who have been disproportionately affected by this conflict." She goes on to detail specific confidence-building measures that must be put in place to protect women and girls (UN Office of SRSG-SVC, 2015).

In terms of the securitization of rape and sexual violence in Syria - which focuses almost exclusively on heterosexual females - these results highlight the following: women and girls who conform with accepted standards of gender intelligibility are treated as a population worthy of protection. Their experiences are homogenized and they are presented as a monolithic

third-world subject (Mohanty, 1988; Steans, 2008). This 'knowledge' is used to inform biopolitical practices of violence and global security.

*"This is beyond something we've seen before"*

The quote above is another statement made by Angelina Jolie. It was made before a House of Lords select committee on sexual violence in war. Referring specifically to rape and sexual violence committed by ISIS in Syria she goes on to say: "the most aggressive terrorist group in the world today knows what we know, knows that it is a very effective weapon...they are using it as a centrepiece of their terror and their way of destroying communities and families" (Guilbert, 2015).

In terms of addressing crimes committed by ISIS, Jolie is unequivocal: "we really have to have a very strong response at this time to this particular group." Returning to a point made earlier, as disturbing as these accounts are, and despite Jolie's claim, these actions are not unique to ISIS. The Japanese Imperial Army forced women and girls, referred to as 'Comfort Women', into sexual slavery during the Second World War. Women were also detained in 'rape camps' and used as sex slaves during the Bosnian genocide. In other reports (see the UN commission, 2013) and statements (this time made by the SRSG-SVC) ISIS have been singled out for their brutalization of women and for institutionalizing sexual violence as central to their ideology and operations. As illustrated by this headline: "ISIS enshrines a Theology of Rape. The systematic rape of women and girls from the Yazidi religious minority has become deeply enmeshed in the organization and the radical theology of the Islamic State" (Callimachi, 2015).

Indeed a number of reports have included details about the abduction and enslavement of Yazidi women (for example Human Rights Council, 2015). In 2016 the Human Rights Council produced a specific report on these attacks: '*They came to destroy*' (it is worth noting that detailed acts of violence against men and boys are also included in the report). Notwithstanding the reports' claim that mass rape did not occur, the language used towards the latter part of the report contradicts this claim:

*Yazidi women and girls, captured by ISIS and registered and sold in Syria and Iraq, are subjected to organized sexual violence on a massive scale occurring in the context of their sexual enslavement. Women and girls suffer multiple - sometimes hundreds - of rapes by their various fighter-owners (2016, p. 27 emphasis added).*

In many of the news media headlines about ISIS and their use of rape and sexual violence, the first two stages of the fetishization process are at play. The atrocities committed by ISIS are described as "gut-wrenching" and as a "despicable brand of destruction"

that “knows no bounds” (Sippel, nd). In terms of the language used to describe the group, they are referred to as: “Jihadi monsters” who pray on innocent young women forcing them into sexual slavery (Christodoulou, 2017); “twisted Jihadis” and “vile Islamic State (ISIS) fighters who swap pictures and prices of young Yazidi girls” (O’Brien, 2017). We are also informed that they released a “rape handbook’ to fighters, with 15 sickening new rules...” (Shammas, 2015), and that rape and slavery was used to “lure...UK ISIS recruits with a history of sexual violence” (Townsend, 2017). Finally, the then US Secretary of State, John Kerry, wrote the following on twitter: “there is evil in this world. ISIL = ugly, savage, inexplicable, nihilistic, valueless evil.”

This singling out of the extremist terrorist ‘other’ can be traced back to the Bush-administrations’ ‘Global War on Terror’ - a foreign policy narrative created in response to the 9/11 terror attacks. As Richter-Montpetit points out, with reference to a statement made by Bush: “this discourse essentializes and then pitches the ‘civilized’ nations in diametrical opposition to the ‘terrorist/’ ‘foreign fighter’ ‘who dwells in the dark corners of the earth...” (2007, p. 42). Within this narrative it becomes the duty of the west to bring democracy and civilization to rogue states. In the words of Bush: we will “smoke the enemy out of their caves” (Nayak, 2006, p. 43). In a similar vein Shepherd (2006), in relation to the US intervention in Afghanistan, talks about Bush’s claim that the enemy abroad is an ‘Irrational Barbarian,’ who engages in barbaric behavior towards women (see also Nayak 2006 for a more detailed discussion of the US’ orientalist project to save its state identity through infantilization, demonization, dehumanization and the sexual commodification of the ‘Other’).

This representation of ‘Orientals’ and the ‘Orient’ within western discourses is not new. Dating back to the classical period, these narratives continue to inform western responses to the Middle East (Richter-Montpetit, 2007). Orientalism, as coined by Said (1979), is based upon ontological and epistemological distinctions between the ‘orient’ and the ‘occident’, where the west dominates, restructures and has authority over this threatening, dangerous, mysterious ‘Other.’ For Said (1979, p. 300) orientalism is the systematic attempt to distinguish “between the West, which is rational, developed, humane, superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, undeveloped, inferior.” Furthermore, the Orient is considered a “hotbed of terrorism, ignorance, poverty, oppression, racism and misogyny” (Nyak, 2006, p. 46). This process of ‘Othering’ is reflected in global advocacy and foreign policy discourse. As highlighted by Mertens and Pardy (2017), during the Global Summit on Sexual violence in Conflict, Angelina Jolie uses the terms ‘we’ and ‘us’ repeatedly. She says:

*“we live in safe countries, with doctors we can go to when we’re hurt, police we can turn to when we’re wronged, and institutions that protect us” (Jolie, 2014).*

This, as the authors point out, not only implies that our progressive modernity keeps us safe, it reproduces the colonial binary of ‘us’ and ‘them’ in both cultural and spatial terms. Furthermore, it hardens “the differences between saviors and victims, the free and the unfree” (Mertens and Pardy, 2017, p.959).

This rhetoric was also reiterated in John Kerry’s (2014) speech at the Summit:

*“[T]he civilized world will not tolerate that transgression, and there will be consequences for those who do...it ought to be personal for every man, woman and child on Earth, because it degrades and defiles the very idea of civilization. And the civilized world needs to come together and take a stand.”*

As illustrated from these results, accounts of crimes committed by ISIS in Syria have reproduced these ethnocentric and orientalist interpretations. Furthermore, these representations add to the cannon of gendered narratives pertaining to the war on terror. Indeed, Bush’s overarching narrative linked “the fight against terrorism to a battle for the rights and dignity of women” (Steans, 2008, p.160). These results demonstrate that both then and now women are used as commodities within global policy making.

In terms of the PE of VAWG in Syria, these discursive representations have overshadowed the wide range of violence faced by women living in ISIS-controlled areas. With regards to the buying and selling of women and girls, as alarming as these accounts are, adopting a PE approach means acknowledging the complexity of trade transactions between the state, businesses and belligerents (Richani, 2016). In addition to using the sex trade to fund its terrorist activities, ISIS also sold oil to the Syrian government from the refineries it controlled in the north. Not only does this highlight the interdependent relationship between the different groups operating within the war machine in Syria (Richani, 2016), it demonstrates how sexual violence was not the only means by which ISIS funded its operations. This discussion enriches our understanding of the war economy in Syria.

In an effort to uncover more reliable sources about the nature and extent of CRSV in Syria, some activists have resorted to using crowd-sourced methods to collect this data. The WMC, specifically the Women Under Siege journalism project, is dedicated to researching how rape and other forms of sexualized violence are used during war and armed conflict. Using crowdsourcing technology - allowing survivors, witnesses, and first-responders to respond via email, Twitter or directly to the site - the WMC have gathered real-time reports of rape, sexual assault and groping in Syria. It also documents the consequences and impact of this violence. In April 2013, Lauren Wolfe, the director, posted the following in her blog Syria has a massive rape crisis:

*Although most coverage of the Syrian civil war tends to focus on the fighting between the two sides, this war, like most, has a more insidious dimension: rape has been reportedly used widely as a tool of control, intimidation, and humiliation throughout the conflict.*

Using their crowd-sourced map the WMC (along with Syrian activists and journalists; Columbia University epidemiologists and the Syrian-American Medical Society) has gathered 162 unverified stories on CRSV in Syria between March 2011 and March 2013. These are broken down into 266 separate pieces of data (see Wolfe, 2013). The website provides a number of facts and figures relating to victims and perpetrators. The map indicates where an incident (these are broken down into categories) has taken place and users can click on it to retrieve more information. Oftentimes a link to the original article is provided. Search results for Syria contain blog discussions, videos, links to newspaper articles, and other types of information about rape and sexual violence in Syria (see WMC).

Based on unverified accounts of rape, gang rape and torture, the WMC posits that appalling acts of sexualized violence are being carried out against women, men, and children in Syria. They acknowledge however, that sexual violence is being used “haphazardly and not necessarily as an organized strategy” (Dr. Karestan Koenen, associate professor of epidemiology at the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University and the lead epidemiologist on the mapping project. See Wolfe, 2012). Despite this Lauren Wolfe (2012) continues to publish blogs stating that rape is being used as a strategy to “terrorize its people.” These conflicting accounts are problematic when they are implicated in the securitization of CRSV, which has clear implications for international aid and development. Indeed, it was based on information provided on this website, and their crowd-sourced map, that William Hague deployed resources in the region.

Stage three of the fetishization process involves appealing to the international community to intervene. In terms of objectification (stage two) and the relationship between power and knowledge, we can see how the language used in discourses surrounding CRSV influences how the international community distributes aid and resources. Here knowledge is produced attesting to the alarming and brutal nature of wartime rape and sexual violence. This is used to mobilize international concern and interest. In terms of intervention (stage three), UNSCR 2106 explicitly “encourages Member States and donors to support national and international programs that assist victims of sexual violence,” naming specifically the Trust Fund for Victims. Indeed, at the G8 reception, William Hague announced that the UK would contribute a further £500,000 to the International Criminal Court Trust Fund for Victims (Gov.UK, 2013). By April 2013 the UK - as part PSVI - had contributed £1.5million to this trust.

A year later at the Global Summit to end Sexual

Violence, the UK Government pledged a further £6million to support survivors of sexual violence in conflict, including £4.25million for the UN Trust Fund to end Violence against Women; £1million for the International Criminal Court Trust Fund for Victims; and, £750,000 for the International Organization for Migration. Both Finland and Bahrain announced €2m and US \$100,000, respectively, to the Stop Rape Now UN Fund for Action against Sexual Violence in Conflict (Gov.UK, 2015. hereafter UN Action). The mission statement of this organization is to end “sexual violence during and in the wake of conflict” and “respond effectively to the needs of survivors.” Here CRSV is described as “a present-day emergency affecting millions of people, primarily women and girls.” These statements, which also engage in the commodification of women and girls, are reminiscent of those made by the SRSG-SVC with regards to female victims in Syria. This was discussed earlier.

With regards to Syria, in December 2008, UN Action established a Multi-Donor Trust Fund to mobilize funds in the fight against CRSV. The webpage for this UN fund includes details of the various programmes, participating organizations and contributors that are involved in raising funds for this cause. These are broken down by country and region. According to the UN Action annual Multi-Partner Trust Fund (MPTF) report, as of December 31 2015, activities implemented under the Fund had reached US \$35m (see UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office). The MPTF office currently has two projects for addressing CRSV in Syria. These are: ‘Preventing and Responding to SGBV with a Special Focus on Syrian CRSV, through Capacity Building, Advocacy and Knowledge Products;’ and, ‘Strengthen Prevention and Response to CRSV in the Syria Conflict and Other Forms of SGBV in Jordan through Improved Access to Justice and Engagement with Community Leaders.’ The target for both projects is to raise US\$500,000.

## DISCUSSION

The aims and objectives of this research were as follows:

- (1) Unpack the securitization of wartime rape and sexual violence;
- (2) Provide an original analysis of this phenomenon in the context of the ongoing crisis in Syria, paying particular attention to accounts that sensationalize and objectify atrocities perpetrated in ISIS-controlled areas of the Middle- East;
- (3) Engage in a poststructural analysis of the language used when discussing rape and sexual violence within global policy, advocacy and news media;
- (4) Provide specific and detailed examples of how this securitization agenda informs how funds are mobilized and how aid and resources are distributed in Syria;

(5) Highlight how the international PE of the Syrian conflict has been obscured by a securitization agenda that prioritizes rape and sexual violence.

According to Hirschauer (2014, p. 6): “[s]ecuritization is a deeply intersubjective process, meaning it is predicated upon an intense interplay between subjects” (Meger, 2016a, b; Mertens and Pardy, 2017). Poststructural feminists invite us to view the relationship between knower and known as fragile (Doty, 1996; Hansen, 2015; Steans, 2013; Wilcox, 2015). In this instance we must treat knowledge production (what is known) around/about CRSV by the securitization actors (the knowers) with caution for, as demonstrated, these discourses are implicated in the securitization of wartime rape and sexual violence (Hirschauer, 2014; Meger 2016a, 2015b; Mertens and Pardy, 2017) Earlier it was argued that discourses give meaning to things (Shepherd, 2015). As highlighted throughout, the existential threat component routinely applied to CRSV - wartime rape in particular- is persuasive and has the ability to inform global peace and development.

With regards to the first three objectives of this research (outlined above) this article has demonstrated how wartime rape and sexual violence are prioritized and politicized within international security. It examined discursive representations of rape and sexual violence in Syria by policymakers, activists and the news media. Adding to an existing body of work, it examined how these actors - whether in the context of CRSV more broadly, or with specific reference to Syria - have the power to produce certain ‘truths’ and ‘knowledge’ about this phenomenon that has implications for North-South biopolitical practices (Agathangelou and Turcotte, 2015; Brunner, 2016; Doty, 1996; McKinnon, 2016; Mohanty, 1988; Olivius, 2016a, 2016b; Saleh, 2016; Spivak, 1988; Steans, 2013).

Drawing upon discourse analysis and poststructural feminist perspectives findings identified the following within discursive representations of CRSV: the habitual use of the terms ‘widespread’ and ‘systematic’ to describe rape and sexual violence and, the universal application of the ‘rape-as-a-weapon’ of war narrative to understand/explain this violence. With regards to Syria, we are informed that rape and sexual violence have reached epidemic levels in the country. Reports of mass rape and systematic sexual assault - mainly against women and girls - dominated stories about this conflict (Alsaba and Kapilashrami, 2016; Crawford, Green and Parkinson, 2014; Meger 2016a, 2016b). As Alsaba and Kapilashrami (2016) point out - with specific reference to women - the spectrum of violence Syrian women and girls have been subjected to is wide-ranging.

Indeed, western news stories, global advocacy, and foreign policy rhetoric reproduce familiar orientalist accounts of violence perpetrated in the Global South. They also speak to gender and the body politic in the war on terror (Steans, 2008). In terms of our discussion

here, this violence is firmly placed within the weapon of war paradigm (Askin, 2003; Cohn, 2013; Buss, 2009; Card, 1996; Leatherman, 2011; Lentin, 1999; Mackenzie, 2010; Waller, 2012).

Addressing the fourth objective, the implication of these representations (stages one and two of the fetishisation of CRSV) was discussed. This was done in relation to the UN Fund for Action against Sexual Violence in Conflict and UK foreign aid investments in Syria and beyond (stage three of the fetishisation of CRSV). These accounts were also analyzed against the backdrop of the PE of violence in Syria. The results of this research lead to the following conclusion: the securitization of rape and sexual violence can be applied to Syria. As this analysis has revealed, this marginalizes other forms of GBV (Alsaba and Kapilashrami, 2016; Crawford et al., 2014; Freedman, 2016; Meger, 2016a, 2016b).

In response this article has drawn attention to the range of GBV committed in Syria. This includes both institutional and structural forms of violence. It was argued that a lack of access to employment is considered a form of structural violence. This was discussed in relation forced prostitution. A lack of access to education can also be added to this list. Whilst both sexes are affected - particularly when schools are bombed or used as detention centers – girls, however, are disproportionately affected due patriarchal understandings regarding the sexual division of labor. In Syria restrictions placed upon women’s mobility outside of the home impacts their ability to access education as well as formal employment. And, as highlighted, the use of early and forced marriage further restricts their access to education (Save the Children, 2014; UNICEF, 2014; WRC, 2016).

To reiterate: the aim has not been to diminish the atrocities being perpetrated in Syria. Rather, this study sought to draw attention to the selective focus on CRSV and the ‘rape-as-a-weapon’ of war narrative at the expense of other types of GBV committed against civilians. As such it enriches existing research on CRSV (see Baaz and Stern, 2013; 2014; Davies and True, 2015; Henry, 2016, 2014; Hirschauer, 2014; Leatherman, 2011; Schneider et al., 2015; Skjelsbæk, 2001; Wood, 2014, 2009).

In relation to the final objective, results demonstrate that this representation of the situation in Syria obscures the international PE of this conflict and fails to capture the complexity of this war. To rectify this we must examine how the various actors fighting in Syria, with their diverse ideologies and agendas, impact upon both civilian men and women within and beyond the country’s borders. More research on the motivations of perpetrators will help us to better understand and respond to the increased risk and vulnerabilities faced by victims. In addition, as demonstrated here, understanding gender relations, ideologies and social structures - as well as forms of GBV prior to the outbreak of war – facilitates a better understanding of

these phenomena during conflict (Davies and True, 2015). Syria is no exception. Institutional and structural forms of gender inequality and discrimination framed the political, social and economic environment for Syrian women prior to the conflict (WILPF, 2016). This analysis highlights how these and other forms of interpersonal and structural forms of GBV are both produced and reproduced within and beyond the Syrian conflict zone.

This article has contributed to a better understanding of the complex relationship between economic globalization, neoliberalism and gendered coping strategies within the informal economy in Syria. As research demonstrates, men, for the most part, resorted to combat and criminal activities (Banwell, 2015; Peterson, 2009). Women, in the discussion provided here, engage in coping activities. Yet these strategies (as outlined earlier) are being obscured by a global security agenda that prioritizes a particular account of CRSV.

Indeed, failure to examine the gendered, economic and political contexts in which wartime rape and sexual violence occur – as well as the myriad ways in which it is deployed - will continue to impede efforts to eliminate this phenomenon and achieve peace. As True argued in 2010, a feminist political economy analysis "...should make us skeptical that current global initiatives, such as...the UN Security Council Resolutions on women, peace and security, will have a significant impact on eradicating violence against women" (True, 2010, p. 58). It is a sobering fact that her analysis is as valid today as it was eight years ago.

## Conclusion

The article set out to answer the following: how do gendered dimensions of the Syrian conflict interact with macro-level economic changes; state-level policy changes (neoliberalism); and, local state, military and militia activities to:

- (1) Reinforce existing patterns of VAWG and
- (2) Expose them to new forms of GBV?

The results of this research demonstrate that GBV against women and girls has been maintained – and in some cases, exacerbated - within and beyond the conflict zone in Syria (honor killings, forced and underage marriage; and the links with access to education, DV, sexual harassment and rape). At the same time new forms of violence and discrimination have arisen (forced prostitution). This is attributed to the PE of the conflict.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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