Silent No More: Sexualised Violence in Conflict as a Challenge to the Worldwide Church¹

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Abstract

The Tearfund report *Silent No More* (2011) challenges the worldwide church to respond to sexualised violence in conflicts. This article argues that a church response should have both pastoral and theological dimensions. Starting with the *Silent No More* report it examines the silence around sexualised violence in conflict and notes the work by organisations like Women Under Siege to address the silence. It then links the silence to silences in reading biblical texts. It reads the sexualised violence referenced in the death of Saul (I Samuel 31) alongside news reports of the death of Muammar Gaddafi in October 2011. It also suggests that sexualised violence is a key to understanding the scandal of the cross and the death of Jesus of Nazareth. It concludes that theologians and biblical scholars who address the silence on sexualised violence within the bible can make a positive contribution to a wider church response to sexualised violence.

Introduction

Recent Human Rights reports have thrown the spotlight on the prevalence of sexual violence during conflict in Syria, Sri Lanka, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and many other countries.² Alongside these reports, *Silent No More: The untapped potential of*

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the worldwide church in addressing sexual violence by Tearfund UK should hold a special significance for the churches. It presents research on sexualised violence in DRC, Rwanda, and Liberia, and highlights the need for a church response. These three case studies are all African conflicts, but as the reference to the worldwide church in the sub-title indicates, Tearfund see sexual violence as a global challenge.

The estimated figures given in the report offer a sense of the problem. The Report states:

Estimates vary, but it’s believed that hundreds of thousands of women, girls and babies were raped in these three conflicts alone. Men and boys were also assaulted. In the war in DRC some 200,000 women and girls were raped. In the Rwandan genocide in 1994 between 250,000 and 500,000 were sexually assaulted, and in Liberia sexual violence was a recognised weapon of war.

In this context, Tearfund highlights three key points for the worldwide church to address:

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3 Tearfund, *Silent No More: The untapped potential of the worldwide church in addressing sexual violence* (Teddington, Middlesex: Tearfund, 2011). The impact of the report can be seen in the formation of the We Will Speak Out coalition of Church organisations and international agencies committed to bringing an end to sexual violence, and is available at [http://www.wewillspeakout.org](http://www.wewillspeakout.org)

4 The three case studies were undertaken in 2010 by Elisabet Le Roux based at the Unit for Religion and Development Research at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. The report presents the findings of Le Roux’s research with an Executive Summary by Isabel Carter and a call to the worldwide churches for action. Copies of Le Roux’s original reports are available through the We Will Speak Out site, and give greater detail and more nuanced perspective than is possible in the *Silent No More report*. For Le Roux’s wider discussion of her research and its significance, including the work Tearfund subsequently commissioned her to undertake on Burundi (co-authored with Denise Niyonzigiyeye in 2011), see Le Roux ‘Why Sexual Violence? The Social Reality of an Absent Church’ in H Jurgens Hendriks, Elna Mouton, Len Hansen, and Elisabet le Roux (eds) *Men in the Pulpit, Women in the Pew: Addressing Gender Inequality in Africa* (Institute for Theological and Interdisciplinary Research. Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2012), pp. 49-60. A further case study on four communities in South Africa was completed in 2013 and is in process of publication.

1. Sexual violence is endemic to many communities across the world but its scale and impact are largely hidden.

2. Many churches deepen the impact of the sexual violence crisis through silence and by reinforcing stigma and discrimination. Action is needed to overcome this.

3. Churches worldwide, and especially in Africa, have huge untapped potential to respond to the crisis, as they are a key part of community life.\(^6\)

In the conclusion to the report, this is framed as a threefold challenge: first, speaking out; second, helping to change entrenched attitudes; third, providing practical care for survivors of rape.\(^7\)

Before examining different aspects of this challenge in more detail in Section 1 below, it is worth making a distinction between two types of concern that might motivate the churches to take up this challenge. For want of better terms, it is convenient to designate one type of concern as ‘pastoral’ and the other type as ‘theological’.\(^8\)

The more pastoral type of concern, which appear to be the most prominent type in *Silent No More*, sees church action on social issues as an expression and outworking of God’s love and care for the world. Thus the pain and suffering caused by sexualised violence is a reason for social action by the worldwide church. The report rightly states that an adequate response by churches needs to include both compassionate care for victims and a commitment to wider prevention.

There is much to be said in support of this call on the worldwide church to make sexualised violence in conflict a priority pastoral concern.\(^9\) There can be little doubt that it could make a real difference to the suffering of many people exposed to conflicts. However,

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\(^6\) Tearfund, *Silent No More*, p. 4.


\(^8\) This distinction is problematic to the extent that any properly Christian approach to pastoral concerns has a theological dimension, and vice-versa, any properly Christian approach to theology has pastoral implications. However, although the pastoral and the theological cannot be fully separated, a difference in emphasis is often understandable and convenient. *Silent No More* is more of a pastoral document than a theological document, and le Roux’s disciplinary background and approach is as a sociologist.

\(^9\) The use of term ‘sexualised violence’ in this article, in preference to the more common term ‘sexual violence’, is intended to emphasise that its primary feature is that it is violence expressed in a sexual way, rather than sex expressed in a violent way. See further Lauren Wolfe’s interview with Gloria Steinem, discussed below in section 2.
even though *Silent No More* puts this challenge in a persuasive and powerful way there is no guarantee that it will lead to concerted action. As the report itself recognises when it cites an interviewee from the DRC: ‘Churches do know what is happening. But when it comes to doing something, they are lethargic’.¹⁰

Sexualised violence is an issue that many people, including people in the churches, prefer to avoid. *Silent No More* notes that church members will often not see sexualised violence as a church concern.¹¹ When sexualised violence is not linked directly to theological or spiritual concerns it is easier for churches to maintain their silence. If the motivation of the churches for their engagement with sexualised violence is addressed in exclusively pastoral terms, then a church response may be harder to evoke and more difficult to sustain.

The challenge presented by *Silent No More* might therefore be strengthened and deepened if it is taken up by theologians as a distinctively theological concern. If sexualised violence is seen as only a pastoral concern it is more likely to be treated as separate from the theological heart of the church and its spiritual concern. Even if a campaign to incorporate it as a pastoral concern is successful, if this underlying attitude does not change it is likely to remain just one social issue amongst many others. As such it will always have to compete with other issues to be at the forefront of the social agenda, and will always be in danger of being displaced by issues which the churches might find more comfortable. By contrast, if the pastoral motivation is integrally linked to a more explicitly theological motivation, and linked more directly to spiritual concerns, it is much more likely to become, and to remain, central to the long-term concern of the churches. It is also more likely to release the powerful energies and resources available in the global church community that might help to address the issue in a more concerted way.

Distinguishing the terms ‘pastoral’ and ‘theological’ from each other in this way is admittedly problematic. It is not intended to suggest that pastoral and theological motivations need necessarily be in opposition to each other, nor even that they can be fully

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¹¹ ‘If the church breaks the silence, it will enable them to talk about what happened too. But so far, most church leaders and members see addressing sexual violence as being outside the church’s mandate. In most contexts, it’s not perceived as the church’s concern’, *Silent No More*, p. 8.
separated. On the contrary, a Christian approach to the pastoral should always be theological and vice-versa. Nonetheless, drawing a distinction between them can point towards a genuine difference in emphasis. *Silent No More* seems to frame church motivation primarily in what appears to be a pastoral framework.\(^\text{12}\)

This raises a question as to whether more specifically theological approaches might strengthen the commitment of the worldwide church when responding to sexualised violence as a conflict issue. The purpose of this article is to explore how this theological dimension might be deepened and what new connections might emerge. It argues that sexualised violence in conflict can be found at many points in the Christian story, including at the very heart of the Christian story, the cross of Jesus of Nazareth. Since the churches do not normally recognise this part of their own story, opening up this discussion may prove painful and disturbing for the churches. If it is to happen, the churches will need to be willing to confront disturbing questions and address painful possibilities. Biblical scholars, theologians and ethicists will need to be willing to join them in this difficult and highly sensitive work.

### 1. One of History’s Greatest Silences

At one level, the prevalence of sexualised violence in conflict has been well-known for centuries. However, in many societies it has long been a taboo subject, and in many cases powerful silences around it remain in force. As UN Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict indicates: ‘War-time sexual violence has been one of history’s greatest silences.’\(^\text{13}\)

Starting in the 1970s much important work has been done, especially by feminist analysts and activists to address this silence. The result has been considerable progress

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\(^{12}\) After the conclusions to the Report are stated on p. 15 there is a section entitled ‘Using biblical stories to break the silence’, which mentions materials developed by the Tamar campaign by the Baptist Community in the Centre of Africa, but it does not address the biblical material in any detail. On the Tamar campaign, which addresses the rape of Tamar by her brother in 2 Samuel 13, see Gerald West and Phumzile Zondi-Mabizela, ‘The Bible Story that became a Campaign: the Tamar Campaign in South Africa (and beyond)’ *Ministerial Formation*, 103, pp. 4-12.

\(^{13}\) United Nations Development Group, *Trust Fund Factsheet for the UN Fund for Action against Sexual Violence*; available at [http://mptf.undp.org/factsheet/fund/UNA00](http://mptf.undp.org/factsheet/fund/UNA00) UN Action against Sexual Violence in Conflict (UN Action) was launched in March 2007, to coordinate the work of UN bodies in their response to UN resolutions on sexual violence and support country efforts to prevent sexual violence and respond more effectively to the needs of survivors. In December 2008, UN Action established a Multi-Donor Trust Fund to help in this work.
amongst researchers and policy makers in recognising the varied forms of sexualised violence that frequently accompany conflicts.\textsuperscript{14} This has given a much deeper appreciation of the wider political significance sexualised violence often has within conflicts.\textsuperscript{15} This research has gone alongside new work and new approaches by International Non-Governmental Organisations and the United Nations.\textsuperscript{16} In many countries this international progress has been supported at the national level by a range of government bodies, professional organisations and policy institutes. In addition, a range of academic disciplines (law, international relations, peace studies and gender studies) which illuminate different aspects of sexualised violence and its consequences have contributed to both national and international initiatives. Yet the progress which has been made in these areas has not been absorbed by a wider public as much as might be expected. Despite international campaigns like Stop Rape Now by UN Action, serious discussion and proper awareness of the issues are still restricted to a relatively small circle. In the public domain sexualised violence remains a sensitive subject, and in many cases it is effectively unspeakable in wider public discussions. The same is broadly true of its status within the churches, or within theology. Much more still needs to be done at the public and church level to engage the issue more fully and to address the silences around it.

Silence can take different forms. For the purposes of this article, the confluence of three forms of silence merit further consideration: the silence of victims; the silence of wider society; the silence of the churches themselves. The silence on sexualised violence often starts with the victims themselves. Many victims and survivors self-censor rather than publicise their experience. Sexualised violence is so traumatic and so readily associated with shame and stigma that many victims prefer not to speak of it. Survivors who reveal what

\textsuperscript{14} Many of the debates around sexualised violence in conflict relate to issues of sexualised violence more broadly, and beyond that to issues of gender and power. Although my focus in this article is more narrowly on conflict situations, this always needs to be framed within a wider analysis of sexualised violence. Any examination of sexualised violence in conflict must be situated in a wider concern for sexualised violence as a social issue. The Report is focussed on sexualised violence in conflict situations but many of its conclusions are applicable to sexualised violence more generally.

\textsuperscript{15} See for example Joshua S. Goldstein, \textit{War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice-Versa} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

they have suffered often have to wrestle with their own sense of shame and stigma. Some describe an acute sense of despair at what they see as a fate worse than death. The retreat into silence is often reinforced and strengthened by the hostility and negativity of others. Victims of rape in conflict may be blamed for what was done to them, and are sometimes rejected by their partners and wider communities. For example, the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission reported in 2004 that:

> While peace has returned to Sierra Leone, many of the wounds still remain open. Women and girls still bear the scars, both physically and psychologically. Many have borne children from their horrific experiences. These children are a daily reminder of their pain and suffering. Many women and girls are shunned and punished by members of a society who refuse to acknowledge that it is their failures that led to this conflict and their failure to protect women and girls that has led to the plight they find themselves in today. Women and girls who were violated throughout the conflict are ostracised from society for giving birth to children of “rebels”. It is the price they continue to pay, even today’; 17

Victims of sexualised violence therefore often have to contend with both their own feelings and the negative reactions of others. It is hardly surprising that many of them choose silence as a form of self-protection and a coping mechanism. However, the self-censoring silence of victims is not the only factor that restricts the public debate.

There are often a number of mistaken popular assumptions which circulate in wider society. For example, there is a tendency to see rape and other sexualised violence as only incidental ‘side-effects’ or a ‘secondary issues’ in wars. 18 This is closely associated with the

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18 In this view, sexualised violence happens when normal social conventions break down during wars. The breakdown of social relations during the turmoil of war is seen as creating a vacuum that permits these violations. Whilst there can be little doubt that the chaos of war and the breakdown of conventions can contribute to sexual violence during conflicts, there are at least two problems with this view. First, it is often assumed to be the only factor which explains the prevalence of violence, and therefore can detract from a more sustained analysis of the complexity of sexualised violence. Second, it treats rape and sexualised violence
assumption that sexualised violence is a private matter and not politically important, the mistaken belief that men’s nature makes sexualised violence an inevitable part of war. These misunderstandings are all the more harmful because they typically circulate as plain ‘common sense’ and are therefore rarely held up for proper scrutiny or challenge. As a result, in the past there was a tendency for peace-agreements to not mention sexualised violence, historians rarely gave it serious attention, and courts did not prosecute war-time atrocities.

As indicated above, those involved in research or professional work on sexualised violence are in a position to challenge this. Pioneering works by feminist scholars in the 1970s offered important insights into the relationship between sexualised violence and wider gender frameworks. They challenged the simplistic dichotomies that had been drawn between the private and the public, and between the personal the political, and opened up discussion on sexual violence as a political issue. Continuities between sexualised violence during wartime and sexualised violence in societies supposedly at peace were examined and a more analytic understanding of power and sexualised violence emerged.19 In the 1980s and 1990s this more critical analysis was taken forward by human rights organisations, the UN and government bodies, and legal circles, which all became more informed on and attentive to sexualised violence. Reports of rape and other sexualised violence against women in the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia (1992–95) received widespread media attention and prompted a number of important works that highlighted the political dimension to rape.20 This awareness was further reinforced by the prevalence of rape in the genocide in Rwanda (1994).21 The International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia (ICTY) and International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) gathered important testimony and broke new ground in

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as symptoms of a consequence of war (disorder and social breakdown) rather than an integral part of the conflict, and this makes it less likely that sexualised violence will be treated seriously in public discussions.


legal judgments on rape. After Bosnia and Rwanda, rape in war could no longer be assumed to be only an incidental side-effect of conflict. There was a much clearer awareness that sexualised violence could be politically motivated and serve as an intentional strategy.

By the mid-1990s international NGOs working on human rights were making gender-based violence much more central to their work. For example, the New York based Human Rights Watch (HRW) published *Global Report on Women’s Human Rights*. In the Section on ‘Rape as a Weapon of War and a Tool of Political Repression’ they quoted the Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women the previous year:

[Rape] remains the least condemned war crime; throughout history, the rape of hundreds of thousands of women and children in all regions of the world has been a bitter reality.

HRW’s own investigations of abuses in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Somalia, Haiti, Kashmir, and Peru during the early 1990s showed how rape and sexual assault of women was often an integral part of both international and internal conflicts. The uses of rape included:

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22 On ICTY prosecutions for crimes against women, see Kelly Askin, *War Crimes against Women: Prosecution in International War Crimes Tribunals* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1997). On 22 February 2001 the ICTY convicted three suspects accused of the Foca abuses. This was the first time in history that an international tribunal prosecution had been based solely on crimes of sexual violence against women.

23 Whilst Brownmiller had highlighted the wider political impact of rape nearly twenty years earlier, she had not addressed this in terms of an intentional military strategy. According to Brownmiller, ‘After the fact, rape may be viewed as part of a recognizable pattern of national terror and subjugation’ since ‘rape in warfare has a military effect as well as an impulse. And the effect is indubitably one of intimidation and demoralization for the victims’ side’. However, she did not develop this and made clear that: ‘I say ‘after the fact’ because the original impulse to rape does not need a sophisticated political motivation beyond a general disregard for the bodily integrity of women’; Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, p. 37.


terrorizing civilian communities, conducting ‘ethnic cleansing’, avenging historical disputes or simply rewarding mercenary soldiers.\(^{27}\)

At the same time that this greater concern for rape was developing, the awareness of forms of sexualised violence against women in conflict was given further impetus from another direction. Demands from women that the experiences of the so-called ‘comfort women’ or ‘sex slaves’ who were forced to work for the Japanese army in World War II become a more public issue. After fifty years of silence, Korean, Filipino, Chinese and other Asian women became more vociferous in calling the Japanese government to account for what had happened.\(^{28}\)

Yet despite these important breakthroughs, and the knowledge base and good practice that they contributed towards, the impact of this shift has not been felt at a wider public level as much as might be expected. A much wider public conversation is still needed if the mistaken old assumptions are to change. Whilst there are a number of initiatives that are committed to disseminating the wisdom and insights from this work, they still have to contend with considerable obstacles. One of the biggest obstacles is that wider conversation is impeded by the cultural sensitivities and social taboos relating to discussions of sex more generally in the public domain. In many societies, any public discussion of issues relating to sex is difficult. Thus even when rapes and acts of sexualised violence have been publicly reported features of conflict, they are unlikely to receive sustained public attention or prompt a deeper public discussion. Ironically, the high sensitivities about sex in general—and about sexualised violence in particular—make it more likely that sexualised violence will go unspoken and unchallenged.

A further factor inhibiting public discussion is that instances of violence in wars are often so extreme that it is hard to know how best to respond even when there is a genuine will to do so. Attempts to describe such violence in normal language seem to be inadequate. Sexualised violence in conflict can be so overwhelming that society feels unable to speak about it. It is as if society is literally shocked into silence. As Psychologist Judith Herman puts it:


The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word unspeakable. 29

The limitations of language seem to make proper discussion impossible. Although the occurrence of sexualised violence might be acknowledged as a fact, little more is said beyond this. It is not a subject that is dwelt upon. This will often mean that sexualised violence is left as unexplained, and apparently unexplainable. As if, because it is often so horrifying, nothing more can or should be said beyond this.

The relationship of the mass media to this public discussion also merits closer attention, especially in regard to the difficulty of developing a deeper conversation. Many of the difficulties that the media face in addressing the issue reflect the wider public context. In many cases it is simply avoided and left out of the picture. Or when it is included, the coverage tends to be conventional and often quite shallow. It is rare for the treatment of sexualised violence in the media to attempt a deeper analysis. It usually does not get beyond simplistic impressions of suffering and the emotional impact that these have. It does little to challenge existing stereotypes and the assumptions around them. Sometimes this over-simplification and stereotyping can take the form of sensationalism. This offers a heightened exposure to attention-grabbing aspects of the issue, but other aspects are ignored. By detaching different aspects in this way, and masking the complexity of the overall issue, sensationalism detracts from rather than contributes to the level of public understanding.

If public awareness is to be improved there needs to be a more informed public conversation, but is this something that the churches are currently in a position to offer? Silent No More suggests that those affected by conflict often look for church leadership on sexualised violence. As it says in its Foreword:

This report, Silent No More, calls all churches to account and to action. It paints a painfully honest picture of the way churches have perpetuated a culture of silence around sexual violence and have largely failed to respond to the crisis and may even worsen the impact by reinforcing stigma and

discrimination experienced by survivors. Yet communities continue to look to their churches for leadership and care to transform this devastating situation.\textsuperscript{30}

This desire for church leadership is reasserted in the section of the report on the untapped potential of the church. Of particular importance is the statement that:

When asked, people told Tearfund’s researcher that the church had more potential than any other organisation to address sexual violence effectively.\textsuperscript{31}

This sense of unfulfilled potential highlights the problem. At present, silence usually typifies the churches as much as it governs wider society, perhaps even more so. As the report puts it:

In Rwanda, Liberia and DRC, instead of being part of the solution, Tearfund’s research found that the church has largely been part of the problem. Very often it’s remained silent on the issue of sexual violence. It’s closed its eyes to the very real problem that is within its four walls as well as in the wider community. In doing so it’s failed the communities that it’s meant to serve.\textsuperscript{32}

The result of this is that despite the progress made in recent decades towards a better understanding of sexualised violence in some circles, for many in wider society and in the churches false assumptions on sexualised violence remain widespread. Although the churches should be in a position to address this, and although initiatives like Silent No More are being taken to address this, these remain limited and small scale.\textsuperscript{33} A much wider transformation is required within the church and within wider society, and if the churches are to contribute to this there needs to be a radical change in their approach.

2. Lighting a match

Even when there is an informed awareness of sexualised violence it is still all too easy to miss the full extent of the problem. Two books on violence against women in

\textsuperscript{30} Tearfund, \textit{Silent No More}, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{31} Tearfund, \textit{Silent No More}, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{32} Tearfund, \textit{Silent No More}, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{33} Tearfund, \textit{Silent No More}, p. 3 cites the example of a joint letter to the churches of the Anglican Communion.
unexpected situations, both published in 2010, illuminate this danger. The two books are: Sonja Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (eds) *Sexual Violence: Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, and Danielle McGuire’s book *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape and Resistance -- a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to Black Power*.34

Hedgepeth and Saidel bring together a collection of essays uncovering the nature and extent of sexualised violence suffered by Jewish women during the Holocaust. The work documents the wide range of sexually abusive practices that took place, especially in concentration camps. The frequency and variety of abuses that are recorded, both informal and institutionalised, illustrate how strong the urge to silence often is, since there was virtually no public debate on these until recently. In uncovering this material, the collection shows the naivety of any assumption that because regulations under the Nuremberg race laws (1935) forbade sexual contact between German prison officers and Jewish prisoners that therefore no such abuses could take place.35 The fact that something is prohibited does not mean it does not take place, as any law enforcement officer is aware. Some contributors also examine the resistance in some quarters to public discussion of the abuses, and how these debates have evolved and the ethics involved in disclosing information that some believe should not be part of the public domain.

By contrast, Danielle McGuire’s book looks at African-American women in the United States.36 McGuire argues that the experience of sexual violence and humiliation strengthened the resolve of African-American women to struggle for their rights in the civil rights era. She also shows how this background to the civil rights movement has been ignored and marginalised despite its importance. Instead of being centre place in the history of the movement it has been so down-played as to be almost forgotten. In particular, she shows how the investigation of a racially motivated gang-rape of the young African American woman Recy Taylor in 1944 played a significant role in politicising a young Rosa

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35 This point had already been made in 1975 by Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, p. 51.

Parks. Yet when Rosa Parks is remembered, for her role in triggering the Montgomery bus boycott in December 1955, her prior leadership within the movement often receives little attention. The personal impact that the investigation of the assault on Recy Taylor had on her is rarely mentioned as a contributory factor in her determination to promote civil rights.

There are a growing number of works which examine sexualised violence in past and present conflicts where commentators have become familiar with it and come to expect it. But these two books show why it also needs to be considered in places where it has passed largely unnoticed, and how easy it is for it to be lost to the public record unless a conscious choice is made to address it. The feminist writer Gloria Steinem is well aware of the progress that has been made in recent years in understanding sexualised violence. Yet she says these two books ‘lit a match to what was already a longstanding concern’. It showed her how much still needs to be done if what should be plain is not to be missed. Steinem asks ‘Why had it taken 65 years to reveal these facts? Why were they ignored at Nuremberg? If we’d known, might it have helped prevent rape camps in the former Yugoslavia? Or rape as a weapon of genocide in the Congo?’

This prompted Steinem to help create the ‘Women Under Siege’ project through the Women’s Media Centre in February 2012. Women Under Siege seeks to provide information and analysis of current conflicts with special attention to their impact on women and girls. Steinem’s hope for the project is that greater awareness of what is happening can have a preventative role. In addition, it can make a restorative contribution as women in different societies learn from each other’s experience. In particular, they become more aware of how ‘sexualised violence is used to silence and shame the victim’.

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37 Parks was sent by the president of the local NAACP to Abbeville to investigate the rape of Recy Taylor by seven white men.
39 Lauren Wolfe, ‘Gloria Steinem on Rape in War, its Causes and How to Stop it’, *The Atlantic* (8 February 2012).
40 Wolfe, ‘Gloria Steinem on Rape in War’.
41 See Wolfe, ‘Gloria Steinem on Rape in War’. Lauren Wolfe is Director of Women Under Siege.
42 This is primarily through the project’s web-site is [http://www.womenundersiegeproject.org](http://www.womenundersiegeproject.org).
43 Wolfe, ‘Gloria Steinem on Rape in War’.
Projects like Women Under Siege inevitably raise ethical issues on the appropriate way to address a subject of such sensitivity. Questions include: Who will have power and control in shaping the public debate? How are the dangers of sensationalism and even a perverse eroticizing of violence to be avoided in the debate? How can a public debate take place which respects the humanity and promotes the dignity of victims and survivors? What is the best way to address the shame that victims feel? If theologians and Christian ethicists are to respond to sexualised violence they will need to participate in these debates and learn from those who are already engaged in them. One practical step Steinem offers on this is her attention to language and her use of the terminology ‘sexualised violence’. As Steinem points out, feminists have long argued that ‘it’s a truism that rape is not sex, its violence’.44 The term sexualized violence is useful in reinforcing this awareness in public discourse. It puts the primary emphasis on violence rather than sex.45

Steinem’s account of her hopes for the Women Under Siege project is also relevant to discussions on what positive purpose might be served by these projects. Steinem says: ‘For me, inspiration comes from seeing positive results. For instance, a woman survivor of brutal rape in the Congo is rejected by her family, but learns she’s not alone or at fault from the story of a Jewish woman who survived rape and the Holocaust only to be shunned as if she had collaborated. Each example illuminates another.’46

Women Under Siege intentionally focusses on sexualised violence against women in conflict and does not address sexualised violence against men. Since sexualised violence during political conflict (and in times of political peace) is primarily directed against women this is an understandable and entirely legitimate focus for the organisation. However, for a full response to sexualised violence in conflict, the churches need to include sexualised violence against men as well. Whilst abuses against men are almost certainly less common than abuses against women, they are much more frequent than many people suppose. Sexualised violence against men is especially prevalent in torture practices, and can involve

44 Wolfe, ‘Gloria Steinem on Rape in War’.
45 A fuller discussion of the relationship between sex and violence is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is worth noting that in answer to the question ‘Why use the term “sexualised violence”?’ Steinem replies: ‘Because there’s nothing sexual about violence. Sex is about pleasure. Violence is about pain’ (Wolfe, ‘Gloria Steinem on Rape in War’). This reinforces the objection to the term ‘sexual violence’, but Steinem’s straightforward equation of sex with pleasure and violence with pain seems too sweeping, and appears to oversimplify the complex relationships which exist between sex, violence, pleasure and pain.
46 Wolfe, ‘Gloria Steinem on Rape in War’.
male rapes, castrations, beatings on the genitals and genital mutilations.\textsuperscript{47} Despite widespread recognition of the issue at one level, as was apparent in media coverage of the Abu Ghraib scandal, it remains largely ‘unspoken’ and in many ways ‘unspeakable’.\textsuperscript{48} In many societies, and in many churches, sexualised violence against men may be even more stigmatised and taboo than sexualised violence against women.\textsuperscript{49}

Whilst it is not possible to develop the relationship between sexualised violence against women and against men at length here, it is important to understand that they have close connections. Sexualised violence against men is likely to occur alongside sexualised violence against women in conflicts, because normally both are governed by a similar logic and express similar notions of power and conquest. Understanding sexualised violence by men against men is not oppositional to understanding sexualised violence by men against women but complementary. In both cases sexualised violence is rooted in conceptions of male identity, in which male power is expressed through male violence, and sexualised violence is a physical and symbolic expression of domination.\textsuperscript{50}

The ways in which sexualised violence is used to humiliate and shame, and a sensitivity to the fact that this is often hidden and missed despite the progress which has been made towards understanding the issues, are two key insights illustrated in the work of Women Under Siege. These two insights can in turn provide insights into sexualised violence which are downplayed or missed in contemporary news stories, and also avoided in the biblical texts themselves. The next section seeks to illustrate this, in a case study of the death of Muammar Gaddafi and the death of Saul.

\textsuperscript{47} For example, sexualised violence against men in Sri Lanka is clearly documented in the HRW report ‘We Will Teach You a Lesson’: Sexual Violence Against Tamils by Sri Lankan Security Forces (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2013).
\textsuperscript{48} Photos of sexual abuses against male prisoners by both male and female US prison guards at Abu Ghraib prison were broadcast around the world in 2004.
\textsuperscript{49} The churches may be more willing to address sexualised violence against women than they are to engage with sexualised violence against men. Silent No More makes reference to sexualised violence against men and boys as well as against women and girls, but it does not develop a specific focus on it.
\textsuperscript{50} The issue of sexualised violence by women against men, and by women against women, also needs to be recognised and explored, though it is less prevalent. As with male perpetrators, gendered identity linked to a sense of power is critical for understanding female perpetrators.
3. Death of Gaddafi and Death of Saul

The death of Col. Muammar Gaddafi offers a stark contemporary image of the once mighty now fallen. It has some significant parallels to the death of Saul and his sons told at the conclusions of the first book of Samuel (1 Sam. 31).\(^{51}\)

According to the text, the Philistines defeat Saul and his army at Mount Gilboa. Saul, his three sons and what remains of their force seek to flee. They are overtaken and the three sons, Jonathan and Abinadab and Malchishua are killed. Saul is spotted by archers and they manage to wound him. With no chance of further escape Saul turns to his armour bearer and commands him (or maybe begs him) to take his sword and kill him before the Philistines can get to him. Saul’s language reflects his fears:

\[
\text{Draw your sword and thrust me through with it, so that these uncircumcised may not come and thrust me through, and make sport of me. (1 Sam. 31.4)}
\]

The armour-bearer is too afraid to obey, so Saul has to take his own sword and falls upon it. When the armour-bearer sees that Saul is dead he also falls on his sword and dies with him. The next day the Philistines come to strip the slain. They cut off Saul’s head, strip him of his armour and put it in the temple at Ashtaroth. Saul’s headless body is fastened to the wall at Beth-shan to be displayed along with the bodies of his sons.\(^{52}\) Their disgrace and humiliation is made public for all to see.\(^{53}\) The violation would have been added to as birds (and possibly dogs or other animals) feed off the decaying bodies.\(^{54}\) Though according to the text, upon hearing the news of Saul’s death and disgrace, the men of Jabesh-Gilead arise and travel all night to retrieve the bodies and bury them with dignity.\(^{55}\)

\(^{51}\) 2 Sam. has a slightly different version.
\(^{52}\) The name ‘Beth-shan’ means ‘city of peace’ or ‘city of refuge’. It may have taken its name from the practice described in Numbers 35.6 as a place where the accused or endangered could flee to receive shelter.
\(^{53}\) The Jewish historian Josephus refers to the display of the bodies as crucifixion (\textit{Ant.} 6. 374).
\(^{54}\) Earlier in 1 Sam. 17.41-47 Goliath and David swap threats that they will leave each other’s bodies for the birds and the beasts. In the event, David unexpectedly kills or stuns Goliath with a stone from his sling and then uses Goliath’s own sword to behead him (1 Sam 17.51). David is then said to take Goliath’s head to Jerusalem (v.54), presumably for display. However, commentators point out that the chronology may be confused here since Jerusalem at this time was still controlled by the Jebusites.
\(^{55}\) A little later, when Rechab and Baanah brought David the head of Saul’s son Ishbaal, David protested that they had killed an innocent man. David then ordered his men to chop off their hands and feet and display their bodies whereas Ishbaal’s head was buried with dignity at Hebron (2 Sam. 4.5-12).
‘How are the mighty fallen’ (2 Sam 1.25). Then, after David is made King in place of Saul, he takes his vengeance over the Philistines (2 Sam 1.25).56

On 20 October 2011, when Gaddafi’s stronghold, his hometown of Sirte, was on the point of falling he tried to flee. NATO fighter planes tracked the small motor convoy and attacked it before it got too far. Gaddafi survived the attack and took refuge in a large concrete pipe that served as drain underneath the road they were travelling on. When Libyan opposition forces arrived on the scene they celebrated that the one who had insulted them as ‘rats’ was himself now hiding in a drain like a rat.

They pulled him out and initial video footage from mobile phones shows Gaddafi injured, disorientated, pushed, shoved and surrounded. At one point Gaddafi is heard to say: “What you are doing is forbidden in Islam!” After a gun is pointed at his head, he says, "Do you know right from wrong?"

His killing attracted international criticism and calls for an investigation. Initially the Transitional National Council (NTC) of Libya said that he died when the ambulance he was in was caught in crossfire. It subsequently became clearer that he was most likely shot by his captors. His body was taken back to Misruta and displayed in a refrigerated meat container. Visitors were allowed to view his body which showed bullet wounds to his side and his thorax.

He was buried on 25 October at an unidentified desert site outside Misruta. On the same day, new cell-phone footage obtained by the Global Post correspondent Tracy Sheldon appeared to show disturbing information on a previously unknown part of his treatment before death.57 As Channel 4 news presenter Krishnan Guru-Murthy put it on British television:

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56 See also 2 Sam 5: 17-25.
Now it has been revealed that Muamar Gaddafi’s final moments were even more gruesome than we first thought. It appears that he was sexually assaulted by one of the men who captured him alive.\(^{58}\)

Channel 4 did not play the whole video-recording. Guru-Murthy explained that it was not appropriate for TV screening, especially for a 7pm programme. However, Guru-Murthy assured readers that he has seen the full video and told viewers to watch the man in grey to the left of Gaddafi. Playback was frozen a second or two into the clip and the image cropped to focus on the man in grey and exclude the rest of the scene to his right. Guru-Murthy explained that this man ‘appears to sexually assault Gaddafi with what looks like a metal pipe’. He adds that the assault looks ‘absolutely deliberate and clearly caused injury’. He goes on: ‘and it may offer an alternative explanation for those last words Gaddafi uttered on the video “What you are doing is forbidden”’.

Channel 4’s decision to leave the assault off-screen is understandable and appropriate. The horrific violence is ‘obscene’ in the classical sense of belonging ‘off-scene’ \((ob\ skene)\).\(^{59}\) However, this does not mean that important questions about the sexual assault and sexual humiliation of Gaddafi should not be taken up elsewhere. Despite the Channel 4 piece, and the availability of the full video on the internet, there was relatively little mainstream media commentary on this part of the story.\(^{60}\) A lot remains unclear and is likely to stay this way unless the calls for a full investigation into the death are heeded.

For example, some British newspaper reports suggested that the instrument of assault was a knife or bayonet rather than a pipe.\(^{61}\) The possibility that a bayonet is attached to the instrument is very plausible but hard to verify from the jerky, low-resolution and short \textit{Global Post} video. Even a frame-by-frame analysis leaves a lot of the details about what happened unclear. The video starts with Gaddafi already captured and being escorted by a small group of men. After a second or so it skips to a chaotic melee. When the

\(^{58}\) Channel 4 News, 25 October 2011. Channel 4 is a well-respected TV Channel in the UK, and the News (broadcast at 7 pm weekdays) is one of its flagship programmes, \url{http://www.channel4.com/news/}.

\(^{59}\) This classical sense covered scenes of high emotion as well as sexual scenes.

\(^{60}\) An exception to this was BBC Radio Ulster which invited me to discuss it on their Sunday morning show \textit{Sunday Sequence} on 30 October 2011. This interview is available at \url{http://www.conflictttransformation.ie/tombs/radio/}

\(^{61}\) See, for example, Martin Chulov, ‘Gaddafi killer faces prosecution, says Libyan interim government’ (28 October 2011), \textit{Guardian}, Main section, p. 31.
sequence of frames is slowed it looks like a metal pipe (or attachment for the bayonet), has been thrust into Gaddafi’s rectum from behind, and has caused bleeding in his trousers. It also shows a gun placed to one side on the ground whilst this is happening. The video does not capture the initial assault, or show what the instrument is, but it does very briefly show the instrument in place, and being held and apparently shaken or pushed by the unidentified rebel fighter in grey standing to Gaddafi’s left.62

Gaddafi’s own use of rape and sexualised violence against those who he saw as his enemies received coverage earlier in the conflict. The International Criminal Court chief prosecutor, Luis Moreno-Ocampo that, claimed that Gaddafi was authorising the distribution of Viagra to his troops with orders to use it for rape.63 An earlier allegation of gang rape by forces loyal to Gaddafi had made international headlines when a distraught woman, Iman al-Obeidi, burst into an international press conference at a hotel in March 2011. She claimed that she had been selected for rape by fifteen men over two days because she was originally from Benghazi which was now a rebel stronghold. After a struggle with hotel staff and security minders she was silenced and bundled away into a car.64

Likewise, if Saul was a victim of sexual violence by the Philistines he was also a perpetrator. In 1 Sam 18 he uses the engagement of his daughter Michal to David as a way to exact vengeance on the Philistines. He has his servants tell David that the only wedding present he would like from David is a hundred Philistine foreskins. He seems to have hoped

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62 It looks like this is the same rebel fighter dressed in grey as the one a little bit further to the left of Gaddafi in the first frames of the video. The piece by Guru-Murthy explicitly identifies the two together. However, the break in the footage makes it hard to know with certainty whether the figures are a precise match or might be different. Likewise, whilst Gaddafi is clearly recognisable in other parts of the video record, in the assault frames his face is not visible. Whilst the sequence of events, the clothing he is wearing, and a blood-stained sleeve all strongly suggest that it is him, the video on its own does not guarantee this.

63 Owen Boycott, ‘Libya mass rape claims: using Viagra would be a horrific first’, Guardian (10 June 2011), Main section, p. 19. This story was widely reported at the time, though a follow-up investigation did not locate victims who could directly testify to it. The extent of the practice may have been quite limited or part of intentional disinformation; see David D. Kirkpatrick and Rod Nordland, ‘Waves of Disinformation and Confusion Swamp the Truth in Libya’, New York Times (24 August 2011), p. A9.

64 Imam al-Obeidi (sometimes translated as Eman al-Obeidi) was released after a few days and gave further details of the rape in interviews with US media including CNN (7 April) and National Public Radio (11 April). In May she escaped from Libya to Tunisia and received help for a move to Qatar. However, after an initial welcome in Qatar she was deported back to Libya in June. She applied for asylum in the US and after a period in a refugee centre in Romania moved to Denver, CO at the end of July 2011; see Moni Basu, ‘A symbol of defiance in Gadafari’s Libya, Eman al-Obeidi just wants to be left alone’, CNN (9 April 2012), http://edition.cnn.com/2012/04/08/us/colorado-libyan-rape-victim/index.html
that this would be David’s undoing and probably his death. However, David and his men carried out the task successfully and returned to present the hundred foreskins to Saul as a wedding gift. It is therefore little surprise that Saul foresaw and feared sexual violence when he faced capture by the Philistines at Gilboa.

4. The Scandal of the Cross and Sexualised Violence

Despite the evocative parallels in the deaths of Saul and Gaddafi, the sexual assault against Gaddafi did not prompt the churches to contribute to a public debate on sexualised violence. This was partly because awareness of the assault and the video on Gaddafi remained fairly limited. This reflects the tendencies discussed earlier on media avoidance of sexualised violence which does not fit certain conventions. In this case the fact that the victim was male not female, and that he was the victim not the perpetrator, probably mitigated against media coverage. The lack of mainstream media coverage meant that public knowledge and church awareness was correspondingly limited. Many people remain unaware of this part of the Arab Spring. However, even if there had been more awareness of the video evidence, it is unlikely that the churches would have made it a priority issue. As discussed above, it is not just a matter of knowing about an issue, it is also a matter of feeling it is relevant and seeing it as a direct concern to central values.

The matches have not yet been lit within the churches which might help these connections to be made. It is more likely that the assault on Gaddafi would have been seen as irrelevant, and in some circles any discussion of it would probably be seen as distasteful and maybe offensive or irreverent, too scandalous to be addressed as a theological issue. Yet there is a theological paradox here. The scandal of the cross is central to Christian theology, and no proper understanding of the cross is possible without some understanding of sexualised violence. However, the sexualised violence in the torture and execution of Jesus, which is attested in the bible, is never mentioned in church, or in theology, or in Christian ethics. It is hardly surprising that after sanitising the scandal of the cross so thoroughly as to remove any sense of sexualised violence, Christian theologians and biblical scholars have little to say on sexualised violence in contemporary conflicts. They do not have distinctive insights to offer to discussions of sexualised violence in other academic disciplines, and the churches have little to contribute towards a wider public discussion.
My own awareness of the sexualised violence of crucifixion has grown and developed over a number of years. In the mid-1990s I was studying the work of the church in Latin America.65 In my reading I was struck by a particularly graphic account of a sexualised execution in El Salvador in the early 1980s.66 Although I had been aware of sexualised violence in Central America in the 1980s, before reading this I had not attempted to understand it more deeply or systematically. The execution of Brenda’s co-worker made me aware that acts of extreme sexualised violence could not be dismissed as unexplainable horrors. Instead they needed to be examined as intentional acts with layers of meaning. It was researching the use of sexualised violence in torture and counter-insurgencies in Latin America which led me to a new perspective on crucifixion.67 Developing this new perspective remains a work in progress, but its key features can be summarised in four brief points.68

First, that the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth was a form of sexual humiliation, since a key part of crucifixion was to strip the victim and display the victim in public. Second, this enforced nakedness and humiliation needs to be named as ‘sexual abuse’ if its significance is to be understood. Third, this sexual abuse was not accidental or incidental to crucifixion as a form of torture and execution, but rather it was intentional and integral, and crucifixion should therefore be recognised as a form of sexual torture and sexualised violence. Fourth, it would not have been unusual if Jesus’ crucifixion had been preceded by other forms of

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65 See David Tombs, *Latin American Liberation Theology* (Religion in the Americas Series Vol. 1; Boston and Leiden: Brill, 2002). On the whole Latin American liberation theology has been reticent on issues relating to sexuality, though the work of Argentinean theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid is a clear exception to this, see for example, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000); Marcella Althaus Reid (ed.), *Liberation Theology and Sexuality* (Reclaiming Liberation Theology Series; 2nd edition; London: SCM Press, 2009 [2006]). Even so, there is relatively little in her work focussed on sexualised violence and its significance within the Christian story.

66 In the early 1980s Brenda Sánchez-Galan was a teenager training as a medical assistant at a refugee centre near San Salvador. One day one of her women co-workers was abducted, raped, tortured and then executed by a public act of extreme sexualised violence. This prompted Brenda and her one-year-old daughter to flee north to the United States with help from the Lutheran church. She was met in Texas by church workers in the Sanctuary Movement. The story is told in Renny Golden and Michael McConnell, *Sanctuary: The New Underground Railway* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), p. 65.


sexualised violence, such as rape with an object or other physical forms of sexual assault or mutilation.

In terms of evidence and support, the first claim, in relation to sexual humiliation, rests on direct evidence from the Gospels as well as from a wider study of Roman practices. The second claim, in relation to sexual abuse, is primarily a claim about terminology and language, and was reinforced by the Abu Ghraib scandal in which humiliating photos of naked Iraqi prisoners were readily, and rightly, recognised as photos of sexual abuses. The third claim, that crucifixion should be recognised as a form of sexual torture, also involves a claim about terminology, and a greater awareness of how crucifixions operated in practice, and is significant in linking crucifixion to the many different forms of sexual torture that are documented by human rights observers today. The fourth claim, that Jesus may have suffered prisoner rape or some other form of violent sexual assault preceding crucifixion is more speculative and open-ended than the first three claims. It is a claim about a possibility to be taken seriously but qualified with the recognition that the Gospels do not provide direct evidence to confirm or to refute what may have happened, and therefore no definitive judgement can be offered. There is substantial evidence that other Roman prisoners suffered sexual violence of many different sorts, and therefore it would not have been unusual if Jesus had suffered in this way, but this is as far as the evidence the goes.

Theologians and biblical scholars, along with the churches and Christian believers more widely, need to do more to recognise and understand instances of sexualised violence within their own Scriptural tradition. They also need to become more aware of the prevalence of sexualised violence in current conflicts and consider what more might be done to understand and respond to it. This might involve reflection on the sinful power dynamics behind the violence, meaningful actions to prevent it, and support for pastoral strategies that mitigate the impact of the trauma on those who have suffered such violence.

Sometimes it is asked why this research into crucifixion is worthwhile, and what it offers as a service for the church. Part of the answer to this is that the sexualised violence of crucifixion is not just historical. Sexual humiliation, sexual abuse, sexual torture and sexual violence, such as rape with an object or other physical forms of sexual assault or mutilation.

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assaults remain frequent events, but the shame, stigma and silence associated with them impede an effective response from the churches. A better understanding of Saul’s death and Jesus’ torture and crucifixion may give the churches greater insight into what is really happening in today’s world, just as an understanding of what is happening in the world can give the churches greater insight into the crucifixion. This would strengthen the theological basis for a sustained engagement with sexualised violence by the worldwide church and might mean that the churches could bring important insights to facilitate a more sensitive and informed public awareness. For the churches to meaningfully engage with political issues it is important for them to have credible insights to offer on what is involved. Examining the sexualised violence at the heart of our own Christian story would be a helpful starting point towards this.

**Conclusion**

Sexualised violence is a disturbing and dehumanising feature of war which is commonly accompanied by a painful silence, as documented in *Silent No More* and other human rights reports. The high sensitivities which typically surround sex in general and sexualised violence in particular make it a difficult topic for any wider conversation. This makes the challenge put down in *Silent No More* even more stark. For the churches, the temptation to choose silence should be resisted. Leaving sexualised violence unaddressed does not help to bring it to an end. Realities of war and conflict need to be faced not avoided. Only then can action be taken to end them and take care of those who have suffered from them. The false innocence of avoidance leads to an unintended complicity for which a level of responsibility must eventually be owned. If the Christian message of hope and healing is to have integrity it cannot avoid the unspeakable.

As theologians reflect on the challenges involved in this, they can learn from Gloria Steinem’s conviction that as far as sexualised violence in conflict is concerned: ‘We have to know what’s wrong to change what’s wrong’.\(^{70}\) Theologians might even take Steinem’s words as a starting point to examine the long neglected elements of sexualised violence within the Christian story. This is not likely to offer an easy theology or any cheap comfort. Two biblical stories—the Death of Saul (read in the context of the death of Gaddafi), and the

\(^{70}\) Wolfe, ‘Gloria Steinem on Rape in War’. 
Passion of Jesus of Nazareth (read in the light of sexualized violence by authoritarian regimes in Latin America)—reveal disturbing directions that these enquiries might point towards. But if the church is to offer an informed pastoral, ecclesial and liturgical response, and effective public leadership in regard to sexualised violence, then facing these questions can deepen and direct its work.