Donna Seto


Progressively over the last two-to-three decades, the hitherto untold and invisible stories of civilians caught up in armed conflicts have begun to emerge and to gain credence in the work of scholars and international organisations globally. Specific positioning for the rights of civilians in respect of international legal and policy frameworks has evolved in response. An issue that has caught the imagination of many, and which has now secured prominence in international security policy related to armed conflict, is that of sexualized violence, deigned primarily to impact women and girls. Not only a feature of warfare tactics in many conflicts, sexualized violence is also acknowledged to be prolific on an opportunistic basis, both in the sites where the violence of armed violence is taking place and in those sites where civilians attempt to seek refuge.

Donna Seto attempts in this book to address a significant thematic gap in both scholarly inquiry and policy approaches related to addressing the impacts of armed conflict on civilians, that of the children who are born as a result of sexual assaults on women and girls. To date, the existence and experiences of these children have received little attention and visibility. This is most likely due to the fact that sexualized violence itself has only recently arrived on the international policy agenda and, as Seto points out, approaches to exploring children affected by armed conflict has been limited. The book's premise is that when one thinks of conflict-affected children, images of a scowling child soldier spring to mind, or the pre-pubescent child that is head of a litter of younger parentless children, or the emaciated malnourished child, a victim of circumstance, or the separated child refugee. Rarely does an image of a child born as a result of the rape of his/her mother spring to mind, and rarely are these children the subject of international policy and programming by international organisations. A central line of enquiry of this book is why children born of wartime sexualized violence have been absent from international relations and politics scholarship focused on armed conflict and why these children are also absent from the work of international organisations that attempt to redress the impacts of armed conflict on civilians. Seto's inquiry addresses a significant gap in scholarly literature and scrutiny of policy concerning the study of wartime sexualized violence, as well as the impacts of armed conflict on children.

Incidents of children born of rape during war are a global phenomenon and, like sexualized violence in warfare more generally, is not recent. As noted by
Seto, a 2001 report by the War and Children Identity Project claims that there have been tens of thousands of children born of wartime sexualized violence in the last decade of the previous millennium. The WCIP report and a similarly focused study by the University of Pittsburgh estimates that there are at least 500,000 children globally born as a result of such violence. Seto provides a compelling tour de force of the evidence underpinning the prevalence of this phenomenon in a range of conflicts from World War I to the present day. Evidence from conflicts such as the Pakistani-Bangladesh conflict, and from places such as Bosnia, demonstrate how the deliberate and forced impregnation of women of the opposing side has constituted part of military strategy. This book offers a significant review of the research evidence and literature pertaining to the overall subject matter of children born as a result of rape, as well as the associated issue of sexualized violence in conflict, and interdisciplinary approaches to the same.

Seto posits that the birth of such children results from a range of situations – exploitation, militarised and forced prostitution, and conflict-related rape. Striking in her account is the nexus between the brutalisation of women’s bodies and, not only the creation and birth of these children, but also the shared position of both woman and child in the post-war context. Neither is seen as either legitimate woman or legitimate child. Both, unwittingly, are ascribed the identity of the father of the child which Seto problematises in respect of both feminist scholarship on the same, as well as the approaches in practice by international humanitarian organisations. Both are also seen as ‘reminders’ of the wartime context, the brutalisation of community by the aggressors and, as noted by Seto, both embody an identity that may threaten the recovery of the nation (p. 103).

Whilst spending significant space exploring feminist and wider scholarship sexualized violence and where these children fit in relation to this scholarship, Seto makes a claim for seeing these children in their own right, both related to and distinct from how their mothers are understood and framed in scholarship. Seto is primarily concerned with the international humanitarian discourse related to children affected by conflict and sets out a critique of the ways that such children are ignored by international organisations because, according to Seto, such children do not fit the ways of working employed by these organisations. Seto argues that children born of wartime sexualized violence represent a ‘unique category of war affected children’ and are deserving of specific policy and programming approaches.

In attempting to make these children a ‘legitimate’ subject of humanitarian policy, there are, however, risks similar to that of approaches that have made women who have experienced sexualized violence subjects of such policy: that of setting them out as victims, that of differentiating them from the remaining