

G20 Gender Violence

Police Attacks at the 2010 Toronto Demonstrations Targeted Women

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Under the Canadian Criminal code, violence is not defined as a gendered issue. When a girl or woman is physically or sexually attacked, the act is subsumed under sections 244–246, which define assault, assault with a weapon, aggravated assault, sexual assault and aggravated sexual assault.

Removed from their social and historical context, acts of violence against women appear to be a spontaneous phenomenon whose perpetrators lack any definite motivation besides anger or lack of self control. This lack of context also removes political accountability from the social norms and legislature that enable gender-motivated violence.

For example, although women are a recognizable group that is at risk of a disproportionate degree of physical and sexual violence as well as myriad forms of more subtle prejudice and domination, crimes against women are not included in Canada's hate crime legislation. Significantly, transsexual and gender-variant people are also not included in this legislation despite their social marginality and the comparatively extreme degree of prejudice-motivated violence perpetrated against them.

The laws, conventions, and systems of governance delineated in the Canadian Constitution were drafted by property-owning, male-bodied white colonists in the 1700s and 1800s who wished to serve their own interests and preserve their privilege. Women initially had the same legal status as children or wards of the state, and reforms for the rights of women are something that has been hard won through activism and public pressure rather than offered obligingly by the state. While laws can be reformed to be more egalitarian, in a hierarchical society their interpretation and enforcement will still remain subject to the biases and whims of elites.

Throughout the months surrounding the G20 summit in Toronto, the public had seen political dissent repressed and criminalized in different ways. Hundreds of protesters and civilian bystanders were arrested on insubstantial charges and detained in a massive, makeshift concentration facility without adequate access to food, water, medical treatment or the right to speak to a lawyer.

Many detainees were racially, economically or otherwise profiled, intimidated, brutalized, harassed, threatened, and subsequently traumatized. While a tellingly large percent of G20 charges were immediately dismissed, other arrestees, including this writer, still face pending charges and live in the shadow of court dates, bail conditions and visits from law enforcement and surveillance officials.

During the public discourse that followed, there was much outcry among the radical community and the general populace regarding police brutality, the criminalization of dissent and the increasing militarization of Canadian law enforcement. One shortcoming in these dialogues was the failure to identify specific forms of police violence as being motivated by the victim's gender or gender expression.

Numerous public allegations arose from women, queer people, and trans people who had been subject to sexual assault, repeated involuntary strip searches, threats of gang rape, demeaning language and other forms of violence from male police officers and prison guards. However, these violations were often simply crowded under general umbrella terms of assault, harassment and intimidation.

The sexual violence we saw perpetrated against women and gender variant people during the G20 was more than just another component in the larger apparatus of police brutality. It was also part of a historical trend that is common in stratified, patriarchal societies: sexual violence being used as a tool of terror and political repression in times of war or internal social unrest.

During times of political and social conflict, gender inequality typically becomes magnified. Violence is normalized and encouraged among soldiers and militia, and the social or legal consequences of violence often dissolve. Propaganda techniques and public violence are used to dehumanize targeted political, ethnic, or religious groups and effectively justify their continued slaughter and persecution.

Women who belong to these target groups inevitably find a second tier of objectification added to what they already face on the basis of their gender. Violence against women during times of conflict is often seen as a property crime geared towards punishing the male population.

Documentation of rape being used as a weapon of war dates back almost as far as the advent of militarized patriarchal society itself. While it is essential that we have specific definitions of what sexualized political and military violence look like, defining these types of sexual violence as being specific to situations of literal war undermines the use of rape as a weapon of political violence in more bureaucratic, structural forms of social conflict. For example, women and trans people who work in the sex trade in Canada (particularly on the street level), suffer a grotesquely high incidence of sexual assault and murder.

This violence is perpetuated by legislation which criminalizes sex work and social mores which stigmatize it. Such assaults are condoned (and sometimes perpetrated) by law enforcement officials who belittle, ignore, or even invert allegations of rape against sex workers as well as courts who rarely convict perpetrators.

The disproportionately high incidence of rape against sex workers combined with the criminalization of their lifestyles and the Canadian state's refusal to protect them all point to one unfortunate conclusion. Through direct and structural means, our society is using sexual violence as a weapon of class war against women who belong to an undesirable economic minority.

Similarly, the U.S. military is rarely accused of having perpetrated forced concubinage regardless of the American bases it occupies in the Philippines, Korea, and Japan which collaborates with brothels and government officials to permit the sexual exploitation of women in order to "keep morale high" for soldiers. Clinics were set up to test and monitor women for sexually transmitted diseases and provide them with "sexual health" identification cards stating that they did not carry STDs. However, these women were not provided with sexual health education, birth control, or any form of contraceptive.

In the Philippines, roughly 50,000 children have been fathered by U.S. soldiers over the past five decades. While these women were not physically kidnapped and interned like the "comfort women" held in Japan's rape camps, their sexual servitude can not be considered consensual when they were forced into it by economic necessity, political pressure, or false pretenses such as job advertisements stating that they would be working as "waitresses" or "entertainers."

The UN's outline of types of war rape also fails to recognize the increased incidence of violence and abuse which happens endemically in communities, often for generations after war or colonization has ended. In situations where sexual violence is commonplace, traumatized individuals will sometimes be more likely to abuse others as well as themselves.

Regardless of their scale, context, and the types of weapons used (military or bureaucratic), most social and political conflicts house an unrecognized war inside the more visible body of turmoil. In this unseen war, sexual violence is the main weapon used by males of one political, economic, cultural, or ethnic group against the generally unarmed, politically disempowered female civilians of another.

When examining a situation such as police brutality during Toronto's G20 mass arrests, it is important to acknowledge the gendered nature of the violence that occurred. While Canada's legal definitions of physical and sexual assault serve to de-politicize gendered violence, much of the public discourse that surrounded Toronto's police brutality has served to de-gender political violence.

In order to deal with the trauma of sexual violence during the G20, communities must come together to recognize its specific political implications. While these crimes were invariably acts of hatred towards women, girls, and gender variant people, the individuals who were directly harassed and assaulted were not the only desired targets.

Many of these incidents of sexual violence were relatively public and were designed to convey a message to everyone who participated in the protests or disagreed in anyway with the goals and values of the world's elite nations whose representatives gathered in Toronto. The assaults and threats were a public demonstration of domination and control, effectively terrorizing the public into complying with future demands and expectations sought by the state.

While the city's mainstream and grassroots media alike were flooded for weeks with images of riot police beating or intimidating protesters and bystanders, little attention was given to the long term aftermath of sexual trauma that has surely caused immeasurable pain in families, communities, and relationships for an indefinite amount of time after the burning police cruisers, rubber bullets and riot shields have lost appeal as conversation topics.

In order for state-perpetrated sexual violence to be dealt with and stopped, it must first be brought to public knowledge in a global context as well as within current local issues. The full extent of its negative impact must be defined by those who have been most drastically affected by it.

Until we end gendered violence across the board, no socially conscious person should be a civilian in the war against women's and trans people's oppression.

And, until we dismantle the structures of militarization, capitalism, and colonization that render women vulnerable to increased violence, no female identified person should be a civilian in the war against global inequality.

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A history of sexual violence

The United Nations currently lists four types of sexual violence that are described as being specific to times of war.

- Genocidal rape: a dominating group or army forcibly inseminates women of a conquered population with the goal of genetically destroying their ethnic or political group, as in the case of Rwanda or the Balkans. Genocidal rape may also be carried out with the goal of destroying family solidarity and realigning loyalties in future generations.
- Forced concubinage: female prisoners of war are held as sexual slaves for soldiers and militia, such as in the case of the 200,000 to 400,000 women prisoners from Korea, the Philippines, China and Holland who were interned by the Japanese during WWII.
- Opportunistic rape: men take advantage of the breakdown of order to commit increased violence against women.
- Political rape: sexual violence is used to punish, terrorize and demoralize members of a political group or movement.



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