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## The Grip of Sexual Violence: Reading UN Security Council Resolutions on Human Security

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### Introduction

The issue I would like to pose in this chapter is about the grip of sexual violence on human security discourse. I do not want to address the violence itself, but to consider why many feminist – and even non-feminist – discussions about human rights and security have become inextricably connected to concerns about sexual violence, primarily but not exclusively against women. I consider here the United Nations (UN) Security Council resolutions on what is termed ‘human security’, and debates and media around them. I do so because I believe they are representative of an escalating emphasis on the horrors of sexual violence more generally within international human rights and humanitarian law, discourse and advocacy.

Although the seeming relentless attention to sexual violence in at least some of the Security Council resolutions that I consider is partly a result of the success of a particular feminist strategy, a number of feminists have been critical of it. Women’s peace activists, for example, have expressed concern that the resolutions that emphasise women’s victimisation detract from the goal of seeing women as agents of change during peacemaking.<sup>1</sup> Some have sought or supported a number of other resolutions that call for increased participation of women in peacebuilding. Indeed, two types of resolutions about women – those that concentrate on women as victims of conflict and others that see women as central to the peace process – tend to leapfrog over each other in terms of passage at the Security Council.

Yet, the understanding of the harm of sexual violence as one of the worst injuries that can occur during armed conflict, I contend, can be found in nearly all the resolutions and among those who express

competing perspectives on the extent to which the resolutions should focus on sexual violence. My chapter is therefore aimed largely at those who have expressed the criticism I just described. I hope to encourage them to rethink their own assumptions about the harm of sexual violence, rather than simply consider where the attention should be concentrated.

In this chapter, I situate the Security Council resolutions on human security and the discourse around them within three trends that I see in human rights and humanitarian law and advocacy more generally. First, the past few years have seen increased attention to *sexual* violence, even as against gender-based violence against women. Sometimes the two are elided, while other times women are no longer the specific concern. Either way, the prevailing view of sexual violence continues to be that it is a 'fate worse than death'. Second, human rights law, advocacy and discourse have, over the past 20 years, increasingly turned to criminal law for enforcement, with the fight against impunity as central to that turn. Consequently, those who oppose sexual violence often do so by focussing on ending impunity for perpetrators.<sup>2</sup> Third, celebrity calls for first-world solidarity with mostly third-world victims of human rights violations have become increasingly popular in recent years. Some of the work of the UN to end sexual violence in conflict deploys such calls.

These three trends partly come together in the work of UN Action against Sexual Violence (UN Action), a multi-agency initiative begun in 2007 to bring attention and response to sexual violence in war. Its Stop Rape Now Campaign is a multimedia and largely web-based effort designed to provoke indignation at sexual violence, with at least the partial hope that it will result in individuals pressuring Security Council member states to pass resolutions on sexual violence. I will consider here two YouTube videos produced and disseminated by UN Action, and will argue that, in their attempt to appeal to first-world outrage, they oversimplify both sexual violence and conflict in ways that display and reinforce an assumption that victims are forever destroyed, in part due to shame and stigmatisation that they see as accompanying sexual violence in conflict. Similar oversimplifications can be seen in the resolutions, as well as in the international criminal responses to sexual violence that the Security Council resolutions call for.

I share with many women's peace activists the concern that calls for an analysis of the gendered nature and production of war (and peace) have often been responded to by an emphasis on the harm of sexual violence for women. I show, however, how over time the scope has been extended to sexual violence against men and children (both boys and