

Dueling incentives: Sexual violence in Liberia and the politics of human rights advocacy

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Abstract

Transnational advocacy organizations are influential actors in the international politics of human rights. While political scientists have described several methods these groups use – particularly a set of strategies termed ‘information politics’ – scholars have yet to consider the effects of these tactics beyond their immediate impact on public awareness, policy agendas or the behavior of state actors. This article investigates the information politics surrounding sexual violence during Liberia’s civil war. We show that two frequently-cited ‘facts’ about rape in Liberia are inaccurate, and consider how this conventional wisdom gained acceptance. Drawing on the Liberian case and findings from sociology and economics, we develop a theoretical framework that treats inaccurate claims as an effect of ‘dueling incentives’ – the conflict between advocacy organizations’ needs for short-term drama and long-term credibility. From this theoretical framework, we generate hypotheses regarding the effects of information politics on (1) short-term changes in funding for human rights advocacy organizations, (2) short-term changes in human rights outcomes, (3) the institutional health of humanitarian and human rights organizations, and (4) long-run outcomes for the ostensible beneficiaries of such organizations. We conclude by outlining a research agenda in this area, emphasizing the importance of empirical research on information politics in the human rights realm, and particularly its effects on the lives of aid recipients.

Keywords

human rights, information politics, transnational advocacy, West Africa

Hundreds killed. Thousands raped. Untold numbers displaced. Numerical claims about wartime violence play a significant role in the fight for aid and accountability, but in many respects statistics and ‘information politics’ form an uneasy alliance. How do human rights advocacy organizations balance the competing needs to attract attention to a dire situation on the one hand and to maintain credibility as a reliable source of information on the other? In this article, we examine this tension in the case of wartime rape in Liberia. In recent years, the most frequently cited statistic about the prevalence of sexual violence in the Liberian conflict was that 75% of women were raped (e.g. Kristof, 2009a; UNFPA,

2006). Available evidence, however, suggests that this is very unlikely. The analysis offers a theoretical framework for how and why such claims are produced, and complements and extends other recent scholarship on the politics of statistics (Thoms & Ron, 2007; Andreas & Greenhill, 2010).

Keck & Sikkink (1998: 16) define information politics as ‘the ability to quickly and credibly generate politically usable information and move it to where it

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will have the most impact'. They demonstrate that transnational advocates do not simply report findings, but often reinterpret and dramatize facts in order to produce public outrage. Yet to create the desired impact, advocates must walk a careful line between sensationalized renderings of key issues and 'cultivat[ing] a reputation for credibility' (Keck & Sikkink, 1998: 19). Although these findings apply equally in many transnational advocacy areas, we focus on human rights and humanitarian issues – and on the case of sexual violence in particular – in the following analysis.

The theoretical literature on information politics suggests that institutional credibility and issue dramatization are both important to successful advocacy. We argue that there exists an inherent conflict between the two: the impact of 'drama', whether narrative or numerical, is immediate. Credibility, on the other hand, must be established – and may be destroyed – over much longer periods of time. Existing literature frequently disregards these contrasting time horizons, implicitly or explicitly treating interactions between advocates and their audiences as one-shot games. But the long-term importance of institutional credibility implies a potentially endless sequence of repeated games.

We examine this gap in the literature by considering two related and commonly accepted 'facts' about wartime sexual violence in Liberia: first, that the vast majority of women in Liberia were raped and second, that rape was the most common violation suffered by women. Following Liberia's civil war (1989–2003), a number of actors have attempted to raise public awareness of sexual violence and to place it at the center of post-conflict policy efforts. Local and international nongovernmental organizations, Liberian government ministries, a variety of United Nations entities, and dozens of media reports claim that '75%' (or, in some cases, '90% or more') of Liberian women suffered conflict-related rape. Many of these sources pair this statistic with a narrative suggesting that most Liberian female fighters joined armed groups voluntarily, to avenge their own rape or that of a family member. As we argue below, the best available evidence suggests that these claims are likely inaccurate; nevertheless, they have clearly become part of the conventional wisdom about the Liberian conflict.

Employing newly available evidence and recent academic findings, we conclude that patterns of sexual violence in the Liberian civil war differed considerably from highly publicized accounts. Several population-based surveys suggest that perhaps 10–20% of Liberian women have suffered sexual violence during their lifetimes, including the periods of war. These data reflect

an astoundingly high rate of sexual violence,¹ but they do not approach the 75% figure. Additionally, in an examination of Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) data, we find that while most rapes reported to the TRC had female victims, rape accounted for a relatively small proportion of reported violence against women.

Nevertheless, these claims have gained significant public attention and produced policy movement. Preventing or mitigating sexual violence has become a key priority in the post-war period, both for international aid organizations and local NGOs in Liberia (UNFPA, 2006) – a laudable outcome, we argue, but one with unknown and potentially unacceptable long-term costs. According to most accounts of information politics, such increases in attention and resources indicate a successful informational campaign.

We propose instead that the dissemination of unverifiable information, while beneficial in the short run, may undermine both the organizational status and the core goals of human rights advocates in the long run. Over time, we hypothesize, information strategies based on suspect facts may lower advocates' credibility and contribute to a sense of intractable, inexplicable crisis. The most important implication of this analysis is also the most frequently ignored: 'soft' (unverifiable or difficult-to-verify) information politics strategies may ultimately have devastating effects on those they are intended to aid. Raising the bar by which crises are defined – in this case, by arguing that 75% of the Liberian female population suffered rape – may decrease the attention and resources directed to future epidemics of sexual violence.

To be clear, we do not argue that NGOs intentionally use or create inflated statistics. Rather, we show that intense competition for funding and public attention requires that human rights organizations make strong claims. Ostensibly 'hard' numerical data, which imply credibility and rigor, meet this need – but may be quite difficult to assess in the short term. In this situation, despite acting in good faith, organizations may publicize a statistic without fully verifying it. While we focus on sexual violence during the Liberian civil war, the same argument might be applied to other relevant cases of

¹ Other cases of high rates of wartime sexual violence include Sierra Leone, in which one survey of IDP camp residents estimated that about 9% had experienced wartime sexual violence (Amowitz et al., 2002), and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where researchers estimate from health surveys that approximately 12% of women report having experienced at least one lifetime episode of rape (Peterman, Palermo & Bredencamp, 2011).

contested statistics on wartime violence and human rights abuses, such as the number of child soldiers, estimates of conflict-related mortality, and the flow of illegal drugs (Andreas & Greenhill, 2010).

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. First, we provide background information about sources of quantitative data on violence against Liberian women. Second, we investigate a pair of dramatic claims about Liberian women and sexual violence, and show that while these claims have been widely repeated, they are almost certainly incorrect.² We then turn to a more general set of questions about the politics of human rights advocacy raised by the Liberian case. Third, we consider the broader issue of the origins of ‘false facts’. We examine how the incentives facing a variety of actors, including activists, government officials, media sources, and academics, tend to privilege dramatic claims over those that are more rigorously verifiable. Using insights from the ‘social problems’ literature in sociology and from research on the economics of information, we develop a theoretical framework in which the dissemination of unverifiable claims is a rational response to tensions between two organizational needs: drama and credibility. Finally, we describe a set of hypotheses that relate the verifiability of human rights advocates’ claims to their long-term effectiveness, highlighting the policy implications of this investigation and suggesting an agenda for future research.

Background and data

The conflict in Liberia began with cross-border incursions from Sierra Leone in 1989; by 1990, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) controlled much of the country’s territory, having wrested it from the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) and its allies, the Liberia Peace Council (LPC) and the United Liberation Movement of Liberians for Democracy (ULIMO, which itself split into two factions in 1994). Violence reached a peak in 1990 (Cibelli, Hoover & Krüger, 2009) and continued

through the signing of the Abuja Accords in August 1996. Following Charles Taylor’s election to the Presidency in 1997, two rebel groups, Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), returned to fighting. In 2003, following Taylor’s defeat and exile, approximately 15,000 UN peacekeepers were stationed in Liberia (UN Mission in Liberia, 2011).

In considering patterns of sexual violence during the war in Liberia, we rely on four independent sources of data: quantitative data derived from statements given to the TRC, two peer-reviewed surveys on violence in Liberia, and the 2008 Demographic and Health Survey for Liberia (Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services, 2008) (hereafter DHS, 2008).

The TRC collected, coded, and analyzed more than 17,000 victim and witness statements containing information on over 90,000 victims and over 160,000 separate acts of violence. However, although the TRC gathered information systematically and sent trained enumerators to all areas of country, TRC data still represent a non-random convenience sample. While extensive, they should be interpreted only as patterns of *reported* violence, which may or may not closely represent the true underlying incidence of violence. Further, although TRC statement-takers were trained to elicit complete narratives from statement-givers, imperfect recall is nevertheless likely: recent events are more likely to be recalled than those in the more distant past, killings are more frequently remembered than non-lethal forms of violence, and some groups of victims and witnesses are more likely to give statements than others (Roth, Guberek & Hoover Green, 2011). Most importantly, stigmatized experiences such as sexual violence may be underreported relative to other violations. Because of these issues, TRC data provide suggestive, rather than conclusive, evidence about population-level hypotheses. Coding from narratives has significant advantages, however. TRC data are useful for contextualizing various forms of violence; they also have the advantage of extraordinary specificity with respect to violation types, dates, and locations, as well as details about the victims and perpetrators.

Less detailed but likely more representative than TRC data are two peer-reviewed, survey-based studies specific to sexual violence during the Liberian civil war (Swiss et al., 1998; Johnson et al., 2008), as well as the DHS (2008). It is important to note that each of the three studies employs a different definition of ‘sexual violence’, which presumably leads to some variation in results, and

² This analysis focuses on a case in which the magnitude of violence is likely lower than the magnitude frequently reported to the public. However, it is important to note that underreporting of human rights violations is probably a more common problem: in most conflicts, a significant proportion of violence against non-combatants goes unreported. For example, while fewer than 5,000 deaths in Kosovo were documented directly, both a household survey (Spiegel & Salama, 2000) and a census-correction study (Ball et al., 2002) estimated that the true number of deaths was more than twice that number. Undercounts have been also documented in Perú (Ball et al., 2003) and Colombia (Guberek et al., 2007; Lum et al., 2010).

that each study's definition of sexual violence encompasses acts other than rape.

In the earliest study, Swiss and colleagues surveyed approximately 200 women in the capital city, Monrovia, during the first period of civil war. The researchers conducted numerous interviews and focus groups in order to settle on a vocabulary that would be understandable to a majority of Liberian women and girls (Swiss et al., 1998). Survey enumerators were female Liberian nurses, trained to elicit information about sexual violence and other taboo subjects. The authors developed analytical categories that corresponded to informants' experiences.³ In addition, survey stratification corresponded to three highly relevant categories of Liberian women: high school students, market women, and those not employed outside the home. As a result, we believe this survey is likely more accurate, with respect to its sample frame, than other investigations of sexual violence in Liberia. However, its sample frame is relatively limited: women from three social groups in and around Monrovia during the first period of civil war.

In contrast, Johnson et al. (2008) and the DHS (2008) analyzed large national samples, and performed data collection well after the conclusion of both periods of civil war. These broader samples are useful for discerning differences between greater Monrovia and rural Liberia; however, neither study used the enumeration strategies of Swiss et al. For example, both surveys included just one visit to each respondent household; enumerators received only short-term training and were of both sexes.

Why these data sources?

A full analysis of the biases inherent in various types of data on violence is beyond the scope of this article. However, many sources commonly used by academics are fraught with biases, and may lead to serious misrepresentations of conflict-related violence. Scholars have considered biases in, for example, newspaper reporting (e.g. Möller, 2011), TRC data (Leiby, 2009; Theidon, 2007), and annual governmental reporting, such as the Human Rights Country Reports issued by the US State Department (Davenport & Ball, 2002; Hafner-Burton & Ron, 2009). Others have considered biases arising from the process of coding quantitative data from qualitative descriptions (Clark & Sikkink, 2011).

The manner in which information is collected from victims and witnesses also affects data quality. Reporting processes that are tied to aid outlays may cause over-reporting (Utas, 2005; BBC, 2011). More commonly, stigma, poor recall and other factors lead to under-reporting of human rights violations. Because of the sensitive nature of the data collected, and the difficult circumstances of its collection, bias affects nearly all human rights reporting processes, but especially those based on convenience samples rather than systematic sampling procedures.

As the preceding discussion makes clear, the data sources we consult in assessing claims about violence in Liberia are imperfect. Why, then, would we regard them as more accurate than claims based on other sources? First, while we have no expectation that these studies are perfectly representative, each was constructed to be as representative as possible with respect to its reference population, sampling randomly over strata of women and girls in greater Monrovia (Swiss et al., 1998), Liberian households (DHS, 2008; Johnson et al., 2008), or ex-combatants (Pugel, 2007). Among analyses that make quantitative claims about sexual violence during the Liberian civil war, these are the only studies known to the authors that relied on probability sampling rather than on convenience sampling. An exception is data from the TRC, which were collected systematically, by enumerators who visited every Liberian county. These data represent the largest single collection of testimony regarding the Liberian war currently in existence. However, as previously noted, because it is not drawn from a systematic sample, we view TRC data as less reliable than the results of more systematic surveys.

As we explain in greater detail in the next section, the statistical claims about sexual violence in Liberia that have received most attention have been based on inappropriate inferences from convenience samples, and consequently are extremely unlikely to be correct on a population level.⁴ While we are aware of the downward bias that frequently affects survey investigations of sexual violence, we conclude that systematic sampling procedures are the only information gathering technique that allows researchers to estimate population prevalence with any degree of scientific rigor.

Finally, it is important to note that, while international organizations have frequently disseminated unverifiable, and on occasion, verifiably false, information, such organizations also support the more rigorous investigations

³ Swiss et al. (1998), surveying women in Monrovia during 1994, found no existing vocabulary of sexual force. In particular, it was often unclear which acts constituted 'rape' or 'attempted rape', and how those acts could best be expressed in Liberian English.

⁴ Qualitative data based on convenience samples may, of course, be quite useful in their own right – our point is only that such data should not be used to make claims about population-level phenomena.

on which we rely in this analysis. For the purposes of the preceding analysis, the methodological transparency and rigor of a study, rather than its institutional provenance, determine whether we use it as a check on conventional wisdom.⁵

Evaluating claims about sexual violence in Liberia

What are the common stories about women's experiences during Liberia's civil war? Media coverage of violence in Liberia increased during the course of the war; during the same period, attention to wartime sexual violence increased more generally.⁶ Conventional wisdom about patterns of violence against Liberian women cohere around two statistical or quasi-statistical assertions (denoted A1 and A2); frequently cited narratives about the recruitment of female fighters are closely related to these assertions. In this section, we review these claims, consider their origins, and evaluate their basis in empirical evidence.

A1. A large majority of Liberian women suffered rape during the conflicts between 1989 and 2003

New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof is perhaps the best-known disseminator of assertion A1. In particular, in one of Kristof's widely-read columns about the Liberian conflict, he wrote that 'one major study found that 75% of women had been raped' (2009a).⁷ The '75%' statistic appears in many other media and policy sources including the *Irish Times* ('more than 75%', McKay, 2009), the InterPress News Agency (2009) ('almost 75% of the female respondents [in a survey] claimed to have been raped'), the *Independent* of London ('Three out of four Liberian women have been raped, survey finds', Thomas, 2007), a United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) press release ('75% of respondents were raped during the conflict', UNFPA, 2006), and the published proceedings of a UNFPA symposium on

conflict and sexual violence (Ward and Marsh, 2006, citing an internal International Rescue Committee study). The International Rescue Committee (IRC) has used a similar figure in a video about its programs that is shown to potential donors.⁸

Other frequently-cited statistics include 'sixty to seventy percent' (Amnesty International, 2004; Bannerman, 2008) and '92%' (McKay, 2009; UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, n.d., both citing a 'Liberian government survey'). Groups affiliated with the TRC have reported similar rates. The Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Diaspora Project reports that '[m]ore than 90 percent of Liberian women in one study reported being subjected to at least one act of sexual abuse during or after the war' (Advocates for Human Rights, 2009).

Where do these claims originate? Many media sources cite 'a World Health Organization survey' as the source of the 75% statistic. The WHO's Country Cooperation Strategy for Liberia states:

[A] survey conducted jointly by MHSW [Ministry for Health and Social Welfare], ICRC, Ministry of Gender and Development, a local NGO and WHO reported that out of a sample of 412 women interviewed, rape was experienced by 77.4% of them; 64.1% of the rapes were gang rapes. (2005: 8)

The joint survey cited is a WHO Mission Report on sexual violence in Montserrado and Bong Counties (Omanyondo, 2004). However, the sampling strategy in the Omanyondo survey is described as follows: 'The sampling criteria for inclusion in the study were: a woman or a girl who *is a survivor of sexual gender-based violence*, who accepts voluntarily to participate in the study; who speaks English or any of the Liberian languages; and who can communicate and respond to questions' [emphasis added] (2004: 6). Given this sampling strategy, we can conclude that 77.4% of victims of sexual violence in two counties were victims of rape, not necessarily or even plausibly 77.4% of all Liberian women.

Next, we compared these statistics to peer-reviewed findings. Using a survey instrument that accounted for local definitions, Swiss et al. (1998) found that 15% of women reported rape, attempted rape, or sexual coercion (including survival sex). While the Swiss et al. survey does not include the second period of conflict or the post-war period, it is notable that two post-war surveys reach broadly similar conclusions. The DHS estimated that 18% of

⁵ See Cohen & Arieli (2011) for a useful discussion of vetting by rigor rather than by provenance.

⁶ A search of the Lexis-Nexis database of major world publications ('Liberia w/10 war') yielded approximately 2,650 articles during Liberia's first period of violence (1989–96), of which about 2% also mentioned rape ('Liberia w/10 war' AND rape'). The same search, referencing the second period of violence (1999–2003), yielded approximately 4,650 articles, of which about 7% mentioned rape. For the postwar period (2004–10), the search yielded over 6,000 articles, of which about 8% mentioned rape.

⁷ Kristof has also stated that 'in Eastern Congo, you have communities where three-quarters of the women have been raped. In Liberia, you had similar rates in much of the country' (Kristof, 2009b).

⁸ A video was shown at a fundraising event attended by one of the authors in Palo Alto, CA in 2008.

Liberian women had experienced 'some form of sexual violence' in their lifetimes, where sexual violence 'includes being physically forced to have sexual intercourse or perform any other acts against one's will' (DHS, 2008: 229). The majority of those who reported sexual violence (like the majority of women reporting violence more generally) named a current or former partner as the perpetrator (DHS, 2008: 230); only 8% of those reporting sexual violence stated that 'soldiers' or 'police' perpetrated the crime. Finally, Johnson et al. (2008) found that both men and women in Liberia reported experiencing sexual violence at high rates, although ex-combatants of either sex faced much higher risk than non-combatants of either sex. Female ex-combatants (11% of total respondents) reported suffering the highest levels of sexual violence; 42% said that they had experienced sexual violence at some point, versus about 9% of non-combatant women. Of male ex-combatants (22% of total respondents), 33% reported experiencing sexual violence, as opposed to about 7% of non-combatant men.

Taken together, the data from Swiss et al., the TRC, the DHS, and Johnson et al. suggest that very high rates of sexual violence prevailed during the civil conflict in Liberia. Using a relatively broad definition of sexual violence, these studies suggest that perhaps 10% to 20% of all women suffered sexual violence. We recognize that these sources may be downward-biased; still, there is no evidence to suggest that rates of rape even approached 75% or more of the female population. While rape probably remains under-reported, all three population-based surveys used best practices, such as studying rape in the context of other health or violence questions, asking specific questions using locally relevant terms, and providing privacy to respondents, all of which lower the probability of 'false negative' responses. The disparity between systematic analyses and the conventional wisdom raises troublesome questions, which we address in the next section.

Finally, these claims give rise to assumptions about the relative incidence of sexual violence and other violations. Media and NGO accounts of violence against Liberian women frequently focus on sexual violence, to the exclusion of other serious violations. The implicit assumption is that sexual violence is the only, or at a minimum the most common, violation suffered by Liberian women (see discussion of assertion A2).

A2. Rape was the most common form of violence against women during the Liberian conflicts

As noted before, many media reports about women's experiences during the civil war in Liberia focus on rape

to the exclusion of other crimes women may have suffered. Along with the assertion that a majority of women suffered rape, these reports imply that the majority of violence suffered by women was sexual in nature.

The systematic data sources we consider do not support the contention that sexual violence was the most common form of violence against women during the Liberian conflict. TRC data indicate that, while many women suffered sexual violence, it was by no means the most commonly reported form of violence against women. In fact, all five forms of sexual violence together (rape, sexual slavery, gang rape, multiple rape, and 'sexual abuse', a residual category) account for just 8% of reported violations against women, and represent the third most commonly reported violation type against women, after forced displacement and killing. Of course, these findings must be treated with caution: the TRC's sample, though very large, was by no means random. However, DHS (2008) findings echo patterns in the TRC data: women reported experiencing non-sexual crimes at a much higher rate than they reported experiencing sexual violence.

Unless sexual violence is severely under-reported *and* other violations are nearly perfectly reported, available data imply that sexual violence occurred significantly less frequently than many other serious forms of violence against women during civil war in Liberia. This is not to suggest that sexual violence is an unimportant aspect of Liberian women's wartime experiences; indeed, the physical and social consequences of sexual violence may be quite severe. We argue only that considering sexual violence outside the context of other forms of violence may lead to analytical errors and misguided policy.

The decontextualization of sexual violence from other, more common forms of violence also skews conventional wisdom regarding female fighters' recruitment and combat experiences: many media and advocacy reports focused on Liberian female fighters have claimed sexual violence was a central motivation for recruitment (e.g. Wax, 2003), often through the somewhat fantastical lens of the fighter known as 'Colonel Black Diamond'.⁹

⁹ In August 2003, interviews with a woman known as Colonel Black Diamond followed the publication of several newswire photographs featuring female fighters. Described as 'Liberia's highest-ranking women rebel' (Itano, 2003), Black Diamond was said to wear 'jewels and lipstick' as she 'rule[d] by fear in one of Africa's most lawless cities' (Houston, 2003). She was a 'former prostitute-turned-commander' (News24, 2007), who made 'men cower' (Bannerman, 2008). Because of inconsistent biographical details, it is unclear whether 'Black Diamond' is a single fighter; however, most Black Diamond narratives share a sequence of rape, militarization, and revenge.

However, while one qualitative study based on interviews with a number of former fighters suggests that many female ex-combatants joined armed groups for revenge or protection (Specht, 2006), a larger survey suggests that only a minority did so (Pugel, 2007).¹⁰ In the survey, female combatants reported they rarely joined armed groups voluntarily for any reason.

Dueling incentives: 'Drama' versus credibility

In the previous section, we presented evidence that some of the often-repeated facts about rape in the conflict in Liberia are not supported by the available data. To summarize, we argue that the precise magnitude of sexual violence during the Liberian civil conflict remains unclear, but that sexual violence was significantly less frequent than assumed and significantly less common than many other forms of violence against women.

Still, several years after the end of the war, trusted organizations make statements that contradict empirical evidence about Liberian women and violence. Until at least as recently as late 2008, the International Rescue Committee continued to use the '75%' figure in its fundraising materials. Various United Nations agencies have released press briefings including this figure (United Nations, 2004, 2006; UNFPA, 2006; UNIFEM, 2009). In this section, we consider the conflicting incentives facing actors who have publicized inaccurate claims about sexual violence in Liberia, and ask what the politics surrounding sexual violence in Liberia can tell us about the broader issue of human rights information strategies. Building on Keck & Sikkink (1998), we consider especially the tension between transnational advocates' needs for drama and credibility.

The executive director of Human Rights Watch (HRW) has commented: 'The core of our methodology is the ability to investigate, expose and shame' (Roth, quoted in Bell & Carens, 2004). But 'naming and shaming' and related tactics rely on two organizational characteristics: organizational credibility, and the capacity to impel attention and action among disinterested publics – what we term 'drama'. While drama is a short-term need relevant to particular emergent situations, credibility is a resource typically built or destroyed on much longer timescales. Specific tradeoffs between drama and credibility may be unknown to advocates themselves,

as well as to advocates' audiences, until well after the relevant crisis has passed.

The role of media organizations in disseminating false or unrepresentative information is clear and well documented: rare events capture headlines, as do spectacular tragedies and extreme statistics. The media's role in shaping public perceptions of danger, whether it comes in the form of drug addiction, terrorist attacks or African civil wars, has been much studied (Frost, Frank & Maibach, 1997; Holder & Treno, 1997; Slovic, 1999; Lerner et al., 2003). Framed this way, media complicity in inflated statistics about rape in Liberia is unsurprising.

The incentives facing political actors, including human rights advocates, governments, and international organizations are more complex. Quantification has become an important tool for building and maintaining organizational credibility. Statistics are seen as objective; objectivity is seen as a mark of veracity (Andreas & Greenhill, 2010). Truth commissions and international tribunals frequently employ statistical analyses (Ball et al., 2002, 2003; Cibelli, Hoover & Krüger, 2009). Statistics are particularly in demand within the United Nations system: no fewer than four Security Council resolutions in recent years specifically request numerical data on 'prevalence and trends' of sexual violence.¹¹ Simultaneously, statistics have increasingly been used as part of broader information strategies emphasizing the gravity of human rights crises.

As statistical evidence of human rights violations rises in prominence, so do critiques of those statistics. Recently, rights groups' detractors have focused with intensity on allegedly improper uses of quantitative methods in their attacks on organizations like HRW and Amnesty International (AI). In Colombia, for example, Ballesteros et al. (2007) criticized 'anti-government bias' in the quantitative work of HRW and AI. The methodology and validity of this criticism is debated in responses by HRW (Vivanco, 2007) and AI (2007). The key characteristic, for our purposes, is the substance of the authors' critique, which is almost exclusively quantitative and methodological.

Both governments and nongovernmental advocates are purveyors of 'public facts', as opposed to scientific facts (Gusfield, 1984), a status that complicates their use of statistical evidence. As Ron, Ramos & Rodgers (2005) have shown, human rights organizations use facts as rhetorical tools: they carefully select which issue areas

¹⁰ Pugel (2007) surveyed 590 ex-combatants, replicating the instrument and the randomization techniques developed in Sierra Leone by Humphreys and Weinstein (2006). Specht's (2006) work is a qualitative study based on approximately 30 in-depth interviews with female ex-combatants.

¹¹ These United Nations Security Council resolutions are 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009a), 1889 (2009b), and 1960 (2010).

to emphasize, and which pieces of information will define their public positions on those issues. This can be an effective tactic; scholars have demonstrated how public advocacy campaigns emphasizing particular statistical results successfully increased public awareness and changed behavior (Gusfield, 1984; Loseke & Cahill, 1984; Holder & Treno, 1997; Keck & Sikkink, 1998). In the Liberian case, advocacy around the issue of sexual violence was truly transnational and highly networked. International NGOs, cooperating with a number of United Nations agencies and at least two Liberian government ministries, have disseminated information about sexual violence in Liberia through media organizations and funding campaigns. The result has been public consensus around incorrect statistics on sexual violence in Liberia.

There exists no broad empirical consensus on the general effectiveness of informational tactics in the human rights context. Few studies have considered 'negative cases', instances in which informational tactics failed to gain public interest, change policy priorities or halt rights violations. Carpenter (2007) analyzes the process by which human rights organizations prioritize certain issue areas and discard others, but not subsequent successes or failures in the issue areas selected. Hafner-Burton (2008) and Hafner-Burton & Ron (2009) provide two of the few statistical analyses of the effectiveness of 'naming and shaming', but find mixed results. Furthermore, their analyses extend only to rights violations by state actors, who are more likely to respond to this tactic than are non-state actors.

Given that the majority of conflicts today are irregular in nature, and may involve many informal actors and loosely organized armed groups, transnational advocacy around human rights issues frequently lacks an institutional target, in that no single person or entity is available, in the post-war period, to 'name and shame'. In this sense, advocacy around sexual violence in Liberia resembles public health advocacy – for example, campaigns against AIDS or domestic violence – more closely than it resembles traditional 'name and shame' human rights campaigns. Research on transnational advocacy and human rights has generally not considered this increasingly common dynamic.

Consequently, we look to sociological literature on social problems, particularly 'moral panics' (e.g. Cohen, 1972) and the social construction of epidemics. Cohen (1972: 9) defines moral panic as a situation in which a 'condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical

fashion by the mass media . . . [and] socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions'. Under this definition, the common assertions regarding sexual violence in Liberia can be understood as examples of 'moral panic', from media portrayals to the involvement of ostensibly impartial experts. Loseke (1999) notes in particular the importance of four types of actors: claims-makers, audiences, victims, and villains. Loseke's framework complements Cohen's definition and, in most respects, matches what is known about claims about sexual violence in Liberia. However, in the context of a civil war, the 'villains' are ambiguous and not easily distinguishable from the wider populations of males and ex-combatants in Liberia.

The literature on the social construction of epidemics, therefore, provides perhaps the most accurate view of human rights claims-making, at least when rights violations are not obviously committed by a nameable and shameable state apparatus. Lantz & Booth (1998) examine the case of breast cancer advocacy, a cause that gained significant traction after media articles trumpeted a 30% increase in the per capita breast cancer rate during the 1980s. Most cancer researchers believed the increase was due to better screening, rather than an increase in breast cancer per se. Yet discussions of a 'breast cancer epidemic' proved quite effective for organizing a mass campaign. Similarly, Loseke & Cahill (1984) and Loseke (2001) examine how domestic violence advocates often construct campaigns around very severe cases, leading to mistaken public perceptions about what constitutes 'spousal abuse'.

'Epidemics' of human rights violations are typically more localized, intense, and short-lived than other epidemics, characteristics that both strengthen the perceived importance of immediate action and discount future credibility costs. Moreover, human rights advocates are struggling not only for their constituents' survival but also for their organizational survival. Bob (2005: 8) writes that human rights funding occurs in a 'Darwinian arena'. The notion that there is a marketplace in which NGOs must compete – and that this marketplace is not dissimilar to the cutthroat nature of the business world – undergirds several recent studies (Sell & Prakash, 2004; Prakash & Gugerty, 2010; Bob, 2010). The fierce competition between NGOs can create numerous undesirable outcomes, including those that harm the neediest aid recipients (Cooley & Ron, 2002).

In order to impel attention and action, human rights advocates must convince a largely indifferent audience that every situation is a dire emergency. Even large human rights organizations cannot avoid this dynamic.

Ron, Ramos & Rodgers (2005) have documented how AI strategically selects issues most likely to gain attention. In a study of Amnesty Ireland's approach to its donors and its beneficiaries, O'Dwyer & Unerman (2008) describe how market metaphors (such as 'branding', 'market share', and 'metrics') have tipped assessment practices toward easily measured funding and media metrics, de-emphasizing ground-level outcomes.

In the context of the 'market for emergencies', then, data are often seen as advertising tools, either outward to the public or upward to institutional donors; moreover, 'hard' quantitative data tends to be privileged over 'soft' qualitative data, regardless of quality concerns.¹² A 2007 article on allAfrica.com bluntly exposes the incentive system advocates face as they determine whether, and with what degree of scrutiny, to publicize their findings: 'Preliminary findings of a new study by the International Rescue Committee and Columbia University may have given relief workers the evidence they say they need to focus greater attention on the problem of sexual violence in Liberia' (allAfrica.com, 2007).

A further gap in the empirical literature on transnational advocacy concerns the longer-term effects of using exaggerated or incorrect statistics in public advocacy campaigns. Theoretical literature from economics provides some traction on this question. Unfortunately, however, economics literature often assumes economics data: information is assumed to be costlessly verifiable or entirely unverifiable.

Dewatripont & Tirole (2005), however, develop a model in which verification is possible, but may be difficult or costly, which more closely approximates the human rights context. They find that audiences with little interest in verifying a given informational transaction will spend less effort doing so (p. 1291).¹³ Consequently, producers of information find that their best strategy in repeated interactions with non-verifiers is to transmit cheap, unverifiable information. While cheap talk has little effect on interest-aligned or credulous audiences, human rights organizations are seldom communicating

with a single audience. If Dewatripont & Tirole's (2005) model applies in the human rights case, unverifiable claims may produce excellent short-term results among audiences predisposed to agree with advocates' goals, and long-run declines in credibility if other audiences assess the claims more critically.

To conclude, we argue that existing literatures on information politics fail to encompass two key dynamics facing many human rights advocates: the 'villain-less crisis' and the time-dependent tradeoffs between two key aspects of information politics, drama and credibility. In the final section, we advocate a research agenda that addresses these gaps, connecting political science scholarship on information politics to the relevant findings from the sociological and economic literatures. We emphasize especially the practical importance of this research for human rights advocates and the people they serve.

Outlining a research agenda

Questions regarding issue selection and institutional organization in human rights and other advocacy organizations have been addressed in the political science literature. However, the effects of campaign *content*, as opposed to initial issue selection, are less clear. In terms of the Liberian experience, it is likely, though untestable, that the '75%' statistic brought significantly more aid to Liberia. If we assume that the statistic effectively increased aid and resources, the effects of such an increase are not obvious. For example, in the short term, did increased funding for sexual violence survivors decrease or deprioritize funding to other victims of the war? In the long term, will using dubious statistics on wartime rape earn advocates a reputation for a lack of intellectual rigor? Will future epidemics of sexual violence seem less urgent by comparison?

Clearly these are questions that cannot yet be answered, in the Liberian context or more generally. Nevertheless, gathering long-run data can help advocates, policymakers, and academic researchers understand more clearly the future effects of current emergencies. We argue, first, for the increased study of advocacy message content and its short-, medium-, and long-term effects on funding. Bell & Carens (2004) document internal discord in several NGOs devoted to child poverty. While some advocates use imagery of starving children as a fund-raising tool, Plewes & Stuart (2006) have criticized the 'pornography of poverty', arguing that graphic imagery risks undermining long-term goals. Researchers have documented the increased effectiveness of advocacy campaigns based on individual narratives

¹² For example, despite a longstanding awareness that numerical data on patterns of sexual violence are frequently unrepresentative and inaccurate (e.g. UN Action Against Sexual Violence, 2008), all indicators of violence against women recommended by the UN Statistical Commission (2010: 8–9) are quantitative.

¹³ Note also that 'facts' are often trusted simply because audiences trust the expertise of their sources (Andreas & Greenhill, 2010); more generally, audiences frequently rely on 'source cues' in constructing issue assessments (Mondak, 1993; Zaller, 1994). See Cohen & Arieli (2011) for an argument against this type of assessment.

rather than population-level statistics (e.g. Keck & Sikkink, 1998). However, there is no systematic evidence about the relative short-term effectiveness of specific narratives, graphic imagery, and extreme numerical claims. The long-term effects of these and other advocacy tactics are still less clear.

If carefully factual or clearly anecdotal appeals increased funding as effectively as did dramatic statistical pronouncements or graphic images, rational advocates would likely choose these communications, increasing public confidence in the organization over time.¹⁴ By contrast, if short-term and long-term incentives genuinely conflict, the cut-throat 'marketplace' of emergencies (Bob, 2005) should favor short-term needs. From these observations, we develop the following two hypotheses:

H1: Dramatic appeals should be associated with greater increases in financial support (individual and foundation donations) than less dramatic appeals.

H2: If advocates believe H1 to be correct, and short- and long-term incentives conflict, the proportion of unverifiable or difficult-to-verify advocacy messages should increase over time.

A second area for further research concerns the long-term organizational health of advocacy organizations. Over time, public confidence in advocacy organizations that face drama/credibility conflicts may erode as organizational antagonists expose flawed information. However, it is also possible that the segments of the public most attentive to human rights organizations' claims are those most predisposed to trust such organizations, implying that attention to inaccurate claims will have little effect on public confidence.

H3: Indicators of public confidence in organizations that use unverified information in advocacy campaigns should decline over time.

Perhaps the most normatively consequential gap in the advocacy literature concerns the effects of advocacy organizations and transnational advocacy networks on the people they intend to serve, both immediately and over the long run. Given the 'market-like' nature of

human rights funding, overemphasizing one type of violence may lead to decreased aid for victims of other, possibly more common, crimes. For example, although forced displacement may affect many more people than sexual violence, services related to relocation and safe shelter may be neglected relative to services for rape survivors. Utas (2005) suggests that aid recipients are aware of this dynamic: he found that Sierra Leonean refugees in Liberia likely believed rape victims received special attention from aid organizations, and answered researchers accordingly.

H4: Funding for crises is zero sum; increased funding in one issue area or location should be associated with decreased funding to other issue areas or locations.

H5: Over-reporting of victim status should be likely to be more common, and under-reporting less common, for violations known to be well-funded.

Redefining the level of violence that constitutes an epidemic may have serious negative consequences for future, as well as current, victims of violence. In the case of wartime sexual violence, continual reference to '75%' may raise the bar for both expert and non-expert audiences, who will undoubtedly consider future episodes of widespread violence in the context of information received in the past. Raising the bar may damage advocates' ability to attract resources and attention in future crises. Women and girls who survive sexual violence during conflicts in which 'only' 5% suffer sexual violence are no less injured, traumatized or vulnerable, but they may be significantly less likely to receive help. From these observations, we develop a final hypothesis:

H6: Extreme claims about the incidence of violence should be associated with subsequent decreases in aid to emergencies in which advocates cannot or do not employ increasingly extreme claims.

In the long term, the need to make increasingly dire claims may lead to a sort of crisis one-upmanship. With the best of intentions, advocates may obey short-term imperatives that threaten their long-term goals. In humanitarian emergencies, systemic constraints encourage claims that have the capacity to draw attention and resources. But does it work, and if so, in what sense, and with what long-term effects? We emphasize the possibility that distortion of human rights statistics may lead to hostile criticism from institutional enemies, the loss of credibility, a sense of intractable crisis among potential donors, and most importantly, negative consequences for post-conflict populations. However, verifying such

¹⁴ We use the term 'confidence', rather than 'trust', deliberately, to signify the importance over time of *evidence* in public assessments of organizations. Sociological literature has described the distinction between trust and confidence as a distinction between reliance upon an individual or institution without regard to evidence of reliability, and reliance that flows from evidence (Seligman, 2000). Our hypotheses relate to evidence-based reliance; hence the use of the term 'confidence'.

hypotheses requires building on the existing literature on transnational advocacy organizations, which in turn requires a commitment to data gathering by advocates, researchers, and policymakers.

On a normative level, we argue that advocates, as well as researchers, should be concerned about inaccurate conventional wisdom regarding conflict, especially conflicts in Africa. These narratives create and support false distinctions, implying that African wars, unlike others, are too brutal to be explained. Indeed, this view has made its way into academic literature as well: civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone have been called ‘wars of a third kind’, lacking rational, political goals and clear civilian–combatant distinctions (Aning, 1998).

The suggestion that the vast majority of women in Liberia experienced rape implies that there was little variation in when, how, and against whom sexual violence occurred. In fact, significant variations have been documented in Liberia and in numerous other cases. A growing literature on the causes of wartime sexual violence owes its existence to the documentation of variation (e.g. Wood, 2009; Cohen, 2010). Just as it is not constructive to consider the Liberian conflict a ‘war of a third kind’, sexual violence is not a violation apart; it follows logics that can be researched and understood. Wood (2009) argues persuasively that the fact of observed variation implies that some combatant groups, at some times, do not rape civilians – and that therefore rape must not be considered an inevitable consequence of war.

Finally, we are mindful of the evolving role of quantitative data in the assessment of conflict-related and post-conflict aid programs. We might expect that increased attention to quantitative assessment would improve the quality of population-based statistics on conflict and post-conflict health and human rights issues. However, as donors increasingly demand quantitative program evaluations, aid and advocacy organizations’ incentives necessarily shift with their metrics (e.g. O’Dwyer & Unerman, 2008; Plewes & Stuart, 2006).

Several policy implications follow from our analysis. First and foremost, the proposed research agenda highlights the need for more careful (and more comparable) studies of conflict-related violence, especially conflict-related sexual violence. For example, our analysis draws on four systematically sampled survey investigations from postwar Liberia, no two of which used the same definition of sexual violence. In one sense, the rough similarity between the results of these surveys is encouraging: all found high levels of sexual violence, but none found that a majority of women suffered sexual violence. In another sense, though, this rough similarity masks

imprecision. Taking a wider view, definitions of rape and sexual violence used in studies in other conflict settings may or may not be comparable to those used in Liberia. Both academic analyses and policy decisions could be improved if researchers more frequently employed disaggregated categories of violence with comparable definitions.

More basically, and probably more importantly, works that employ statistical descriptions of violence should accurately describe the source of those descriptions. As others have argued, ‘proper attribution and reflection on data quality’ by those who use and disseminate human rights data is crucial (Thoms & Ron, 2007). Finally, to the extent possible, advocates should attend to long-term goals rather than moment-to-moment institutional imperatives. It is preferable to use accurate, if vague, terms (‘many thousands’ would have been appropriate to describe the extent of rape in the Liberian case), and to hew to the principle that one human rights violation is one too many.

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