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INTERVIEWER: Dara Kay Cohen is an Associate Professor of Public Policy at the John F Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. She is also a Brown alumna. Her work in research focus on international relations and security. Specifically, she looks at the intersections of wartime conflict and gender-based violence.

Dara, thank you so much for coming in and talking to *Trending Globally* today.

DARA KAY It's my pleasure to be here. Thanks for having me.

COHEN:

INTERVIEWER: I want to just back up a little bit in your career to your dissertation. I see that it was on sexual violence and civil war already, back when you were in graduate school. How did you become interested in this topic?

DARA KAY Yeah, actually I think we need to go back even further, back to my Brown days because I was an undergraduate at Brown. And really starting in my freshman year I was fascinated by issues of violence against women. And so when I was an undergraduate at Brown, I got trained, I think even in my first semester here, as a hotline advocate for the Rhode Island Rape Crisis Center. So I worked as a rape crisis counselor for all four years.

INTERVIEWER: During her time at the crisis center, Cohen became interested in a career in law. After college, she went to work as a paralegal at the Department of Justice. Once there, she was assigned to the Terrorism and Violent Crime Department. Before 9/11, Cohen was the only paralegal in her section. That's how small it was.

DARA KAY We were largely focused on issues of domestic terrorism. So I was learning about the extreme right and militias. And I was learning about the extreme left and the Animal Liberation Front and the Earth Liberation Front. And then 9/11 happened and it was a very busy and hectic two years. But I got really fascinated by issues of political violence.

INTERVIEWER: So fascinated that she decided to get a PhD in Political Science with a focus on Political Violence. But she ultimately found her way to international relations, studying gender-based violence around the world.

DARA KAY

COHEN:

What changed, in part, is that I found my American Politics classes really boring. I started thinking about how interesting it would be to incorporate this personal interest I had in violence against women with my, kind of, professional interests in issues of political violence. So it kind of all came together with an idea to write a dissertation about rape in wartime.

This is a topic that I find just endlessly fascinating. I teach a class at the Kennedy School in the fall on the issues of gender in war. And one of the topics that we end up studying is exactly this, which is, how gender inequality seems to be, if not a predictor, at least a correlate of the onset of various forms of political violence, up to and including war. And not just civil war, but also wars between states.

And so there is a kind of small body of research in the International Relations literature which shows this really robust association between all sorts of proxy measures of gender inequality. So high maternal mortality and lower rates of primary schooling for girls, and all the standard ways we measure gender inequality in cross-national regressions. Those variables seem to be, or are at least associated with the onset of war.

What's kind of interesting is that that hasn't really taken off in terms of the mainstream International Relations literature, that I'm always kind of confused and frustrated that more scholars haven't really seized on that. On the other hand, there are a number of books that have been written, including this famous book by Valerie Hudson and some of her co-authors called *Sex and World Peace*.

And that book has really been embraced by many in the policy world as people like Gloria Steinem have talked to the *New York Times* about how that is the book that she would make required reading for President Obama. Because it shows that gender equality is at least as important as all kinds of other things we think to be important, in terms of predicting the onset of war, including level of development and regime type and that kind of thing.

There's definitely been a lot of excitement about that in the policy world. And I think there's a group of activists and advocates who have been very successful in marketing gender inequality or gender equality as a path to peace. And has elevated gender equality to something that should be paid attention to by people who care about international security and national security.

INTERVIEWER:

But despite this increased attention, Cohen says there are still huge misunderstandings in the

international relations community about sexual assault.

DARA KAY

COHEN:

The realm of wartime rape and sexual violence is, I think, a realm that's really fraught with misconceptions. And that's in part because we lack good data. There's been sort of a revolution, in terms of data collection, in the realm of political violence. So we have more data than we ever had before on things like battle deaths. Truth and reconciliation commissions are becoming more and more savvy about quantifying the data that they're able to collect. But data on rape is really tough to gather in some ways that are obvious. And I think, in some ways that aren't obvious.

Some of the obvious ways are that unlike deaths, where we just have a body and we can count bodies, rape is a form of highly stigmatized violence that depends on the victim or witnesses to the act to report it. And there are all kinds of reasons why people don't report acts of rape. In addition to that, it's again, unlike just simply counting a body when there have been deaths as a result of war or episodes of political violence. It's not really clear what constitutes a single act of rape.

INTERVIEWER:

Because of this, most data on sexual assault is under-reported.

DARA KAY

COHEN:

And I think, for the most part, that is a fairly safe bet. However, there are certain places that rape seems to actually be over reported. And so one example of that is the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, which has kind of become infamous, for better or worse, for being the "rape capital of the world," quote, unquote. Which is a term that I know a lot of people who study that region of the world really object to. But that's often how it's described in media and in politicians' speeches.

It's certainly a place that we know a lot of rape has happened. And as a result there's just been a huge influx into Eastern DRC of money and resources that are available to victims of rape. And on the one hand, this is amazing, because this basically never happens in war zones.

INTERVIEWER:

You're listening to *Trending Globally; Politics and Policy*. In her 2016 book *Raped During Civil War*, Cohen uses examples drawn from her fieldwork to explore how rape is used in wartime conflict in regions such as Sierra Leone, Timor Leste, and El Salvador.

DARA KAY

COHEN:

One of the main parts of the book is to really talk about the misconceptions that we have about rape in wartime. I really push against, for example, what I think has become kind of the

common narrative about rape in war. Which is that, it's a tool of war, it's a strategy of war. Which I think implies that it is something directed from the top down by some kind of nefarious commander who has strong control over his troops and who is using rape as part of a grand military strategy.

There has been essentially a conflation of when we observe rape to be on a massive scale we assume it must be because it was directly ordered from the top down. So I think one of the main arguments I try to make in the book is that conflation is actually deeply flawed. And that a lot of the places where we see rape to be happening on a massive scale, we really lack evidence that rape was ordered from the top down.

So I tried to explore essentially, variation in how rape is used during civil wars, during recent civil wars. And we know, for example, that in some wars there is basically no reported rape. And in other wars, there are massive levels of rape. So one thing that scholars have done is to try to look at, for example, why did Sierra Leone have so much rape, but not relatively speaking, a place like El Salvador-- which are two of the cases in my book. And what I try to argue is, actually that's the wrong question.

INTERVIEWER: Cohen's research led her to ask another question. Why do different groups use rape as a tactic in wars? What military strategies would lead to increased instances of rape?

DARA KAY And the kind of key factor in the book is that groups that recruit their fighters through kidnapping, through the use of abduction, are much more likely to commit rape during civil war
COHEN: than are groups who have volunteers. In part, because groups that recruit by force essentially face this problem of trying to create cohesion amongst a group of strangers that have literally been beaten and forced to join.

One way of resolving that problem of low cohesion is through the use of gang rape. And that's another puzzle that I end up looking at in the book, which I think has largely been overlooked in a lot of the literature on wartime rape, which is that there's a massive uptick in reported gang rape during periods of war. Even in places where rape is quite common, gang rape is not common. A place like Sierra Leone, we kind of can guesstimate, based on survey data for example, that during periods of peace time gang rape makes up certainly fewer than 10% of reported cases. Whereas, during the period of the war, something like 75% or 80% of the reported rapes were multiple perpetrator rapes.

So I end up arguing in the book that one of the reasons for that is that gang rape can create

social bonds between groups of people who are perpetrating the act.

INTERVIEWER: Later in the interview, Cohen described her experience researching gender-based violence around the world.

DARA KAY
COHEN: I had spent a lot of time speaking directly to people who had experienced various forms of sexual and other forms of gender-based violence. And so I felt somewhat emotionally prepared to hear about people's worst experiences as they relate to rape. However, most of the work that I had done before was largely with victims of violence. And so I was really uncertain about how to approach speaking to perpetrators or potential perpetrators or witnesses of perpetrators or supporters of perpetrators of acts of wartime rape.

INTERVIEWER: Cohen says this process led her to some unexpected conclusions.

DARA KAY
COHEN: I was quite nervous about it when I started doing my interviews. And one of the things I ended up discovering through that process is that the dichotomy between victim and perpetrator is just so incredibly blurry. So while it may, in fact, be true that some of the people that I interviewed perpetrated absolutely awful atrocities including rape during the conflict, in many cases, it was also true that they themselves had experienced absolutely awful atrocities.

And so this kind of cycle of violence was just so apparent that it actually, in some ways, ended up creating a sense of empathy that I think really helped connect with the people I was interviewing. And probably also helped me write a better book, rather than just simply viewing them as evil perpetrators of violence.

INTERVIEWER: She also noticed similarities in the ways that rape culture manifests in both the places she studies and in the US.

DARA KAY
COHEN: This idea that some central tenants of rape culture, at least as I understand it, focus on blaming the victim for the assault and empathy with the perpetrator. I certainly saw a lot of evidence in wartime contexts of blaming the victim for the assault. And that, in part, I think, explains some of the stigma that victims experience in the wartime context where there's just an enormous amount of shame. A sense that victims may have done something to encourage this. So I think that seems to be also evident in the context that may seem like they're completely unrelated to the US context.

INTERVIEWER: Well, this has been fascinating and enlightening. Thank you so much for coming today, Dara.

DARA KAY

Thank you. I really enjoyed being here.

COHEN:

INTERVIEWER:

This has been *Trending Globally; Politics and Policy*. If you enjoyed today's conversation, you can subscribe to the podcast on iTunes, SoundCloud, or Stitcher. Or download us on your favorite podcasting app. If you like us, rate us, and help others who might enjoy the show find us. For more information, go to Watson.brown.edu.

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