

The Language of Gendered Violence and Sexual Aggression in the Spanish Civil War: Conceptualizations and Reassessments

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Abstract

This article examines the conceptual vocabulary through which violence against women during the Spanish Civil War has been interpreted, with particular attention to the longstanding predominance of the category ‘sexed violence’ (*violencia sexuada*). While this terminology played an important role in early efforts to highlight the gendered nature of violence and the symbolic targeting of women’s bodies, it also introduced conceptual ambiguities that continue to inform historiographical debates. Drawing on contemporary feminist theory and international scholarship on wartime sexual and gendered violence, the discussion reassesses the analytical usefulness of the sexed framework and identifies its limitations, particularly its tendency to obscure the structural dynamics of gendered inequality. By situating the Spanish case within broader theoretical currents, this article argues that a shift toward the terminology of sexualized violence (*violencia sexualizada*) offers greater analytical precision and better captures the performative, symbolic and systemic logics that shaped female aggression during the Spanish Civil War.

The Spanish Civil War has often been narrated through the language of military strategy, political ideology and patriotic martyrdom. Yet, certain forms of violence, particularly those directed against women, have historically remained under-articulated, obscured by silence or euphemism. The language through which violence is described – or, at times, evaded – is never neutral. In the case of gendered and sexual violence, this is especially evident: such acts are frequently treated as taboo, leading researchers to grapple with the challenge of selecting adequate terminology to name them. This article examines the conceptual vocabulary through which such violence has been framed in the historiography, contributing to broader debates on the rhetorical and symbolic languages that shaped how civil wars were understood, legitimized and remembered in the interwar period and beyond.

Since the late twentieth century, historical scholarship has undergone a significant transformation, increasingly incorporating gender as a central category of analysis. This shift has allowed historians to critically reassess traditional narratives and methodological frameworks. Among the most influential voices in this renewal is Joan W. Scott, who has argued for the need to dismantle the cultural constructs underpinning historical understandings of masculinity and femininity.¹ By exposing these categories as contingent and ideologically charged, Scott called for their deconstruction as a means to uncover the mechanisms of power and domination embedded within them.

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¹ Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1999).

This gendered approach has also had a profound impact on the field of the Spanish Civil War studies. The 1990s marked a significant turning point, as a growing body of research began to revisit these events from a perspective that foregrounded gender as a structuring element of both political violence and everyday experience.² These studies marked a clear shift away from earlier narratives that had largely centred men as the primary subjects of analysis.³ The emergence of this line of inquiry has since been interpreted by some scholars as an attempt to address what has been termed a ‘historical debt’ (*deuda histórica*) – the longstanding neglect of women as historical agents within the broader field of scholarship.⁴ Initial contributions to this body of research prioritized the recovery of women’s experiences through oral histories, personal memoirs and testimonies that illuminated their positions as militants, prisoners or witnesses of violence.⁵ Rather than simply adding women’s stories to existing narratives, these efforts sought to challenge and redefine the conceptual frameworks through which political agency, participation and victimhood were traditionally understood.

As this field expanded, growing attention was directed toward the specific forms of violence inflicted on women by Francoist actors – not merely as political opponents, but in ways that targeted their gendered identities. Although earlier historiography had acknowledged such acts, it often did so only as a subsidiary aspect within broader narratives of repression; more specific studies, however, have brought to the fore their distinctly gendered nature and symbolic functions.⁶ Particular attention was given to punitive practices aimed at degrading and controlling the female body. The shaving of women’s heads, the forced ingestion of castor oil and the perpetration of sexual violence were interpreted as symbolic mechanisms of humiliation and discipline.⁷ Far from being peripheral episodes, this gendered violence was increasingly understood as a central component of the Francoist regime’s strategy for restructuring both political authority and social hierarchies.

French historian Yannick Ripa argued that the Spanish Civil War was shaped by distinctly gendered dynamics, wherein constructions of masculinity and femininity served as tools for political and ideological articulation.⁸ She observed that both

² For some references within this extensive body of literature, see Mary Nash, *Defying Male Civilization: Women in the Spanish Civil War* (Denver, CO, 1995); Mary Vincent, ‘The martyrs and the saints: Masculinity and the construction of the Francoist crusade’, *History Workshop Journal*, 47/1 (1999), pp. 68–98; Carme Molinero, ‘Mujer, franquismo, fascismo: La clausura forzada en un “mundo pequeño”’, *Historia Social*, 30 (1998), pp. 97–117; Encarnación Barranquero Teixeira and Lucía Prieto Borrego, *Así sobrevivimos al hambre: Estrategias de supervivencia de las mujeres en la posguerra española* (Málaga, 2003); Inmaculada Blasco Herranz, ‘Actitudes de las mujeres bajo el primer Franquismo: La práctica del aborto en Zaragoza durante los años 40’, *Arenal*, 1 (1999), pp. 165–80.

³ Building on this notion, several scholars have critically examined the difficulties involved in positioning women as historical agents within narratives that have been predominantly constructed through a male-centred lens. Gerda Lerner, ‘Placing women in history: Definitions and challenges’, *Feminist Studies*, 1/2 (1975), pp. 5–14.

⁴ Ángeles Egidio León and Jorge J. Montes Salguero, *Mujer, franquismo y represión: una deuda histórica* (Málaga, 2018).

⁵ Giuliana di Febo, *Resistencia y movimiento de mujeres en España 1936–1976* (Barcelona, 1979); Tomasa Cuevas, *Presas: mujeres en las cárceles franquistas* (Barcelona, 2005); Shirley Mangini, *Recuerdos de la resistencia: la voz de las mujeres de la guerra civil española* (Barcelona, 1997); Lidia Falcón, *En el infierno: ser mujer en las cárceles de España* (Barcelona, 1977).

⁶ Paul Preston, *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain* (New York, 2013); Santos Julià, *Victimas de la Guerra Civil* (Madrid, 1999); Julián Casanova, *Morir, matar, sobrevivir: la violencia en la dictadura de Franco* (Barcelona, 2002).

⁷ Enrique González Duro, *Las rapadas: El franquismo contra la mujer* (Madrid, 2012); Maud Joly, ‘Posguerra y represión “sexuada”: Las republicanas rapadas por los franquistas (1936–1950)’, in the conference proceedings *Enfrontaments civils: Postguerres i reconstruccions* (Lleida, 2002), pp. 910–21; Julio Prada Rodríguez, ‘Escarmentar a algunas y disciplinar a las demás: Mujer, violencia y represión sexuada en la retaguardia sublevada’, *Historia Social*, 87 (2017), pp. 67–83.

⁸ Yannick Ripa, ‘Féminin/masculin: Les enjeux du genre dans l’Espagne de la Seconde République au franquisme’, *Mouvement Social*, 198 (2002), pp. 111–28.

factions involved in the conflict engaged in what she termed ‘sexed violence’ (*violence sexuée*), including rape – committed by actors on both sides of the conflict – and the forced shaving of women’s heads, a practice uniquely carried out by the Nationalist forces.⁹ Ripa concluded, however, that within this ‘sexed dimension’ (*dimension sexuée*), such violence specifically targeted femininity: ‘through rape, by violating their intimacy; through head-shaving, their appearance.’¹⁰ While this initial theorization acknowledged the phenomenon’s presence across both sides – albeit with a greater emphasis on the insurgent side due to the exclusive practice of head-shaving – subsequent scholarship has primarily focused on its specific manifestations within the violence perpetrated by Francoist forces.

Fellow French historian Maud Joly interpreted such acts as neither isolated nor incidental, but rather as part of a broader punitive system. She conceptualized this as deliberate mechanism of ‘sexed repression’ (*represión sexuada*) implemented by the Nationalist forces to humiliate and degrade the ‘sexed identity’ of Republican women.¹¹ Joly identified a variety of violent practices – not only head-shaving, the forced ingestion of castor oil or rape, but also various forms of verbal and psychological abuse – as targeting specific ‘sexed elements’ inscribed on women’s bodies, which became symbolic sites of this punitive violence. Along similar lines, further scholars, including Enrique González, defined the head-shaving of women as a form of ‘punitive sexed violence, which threatened the integrity of Republican woman and suppressed important features of female identity’.¹²

A key figure in the consolidation of this historiographical approach was Irene Abad, who further developed the concept of sexed repression to underscore two key dimensions: the erasure of female citizenship and the implementation of specific repressive strategies aimed at the ‘symbolic and corporeal markers of femininity or sex’.¹³ In justifying her terminological choice, Abad acknowledged the frequent use of sexual violence within historical discourse – given its association with ‘the most extreme and effective form of patriarchal control’ – but argued in favour of sexed repression as offering a more analytically precise framework for capturing the particular nature of Francoist violence as experienced by Republican women.¹⁴ Under this paradigm of sexed violence, she also identified a place for more explicitly sexual forms of aggression – most notably, rape – as one of its clearest expressions.¹⁵

Since the articulation of this perspective, subsequent historiography examining violence against women during the civil war and early Francoism has increasingly embraced the terminology of a sexed dimension when addressing sexual assault. Other conceptual frameworks have been set aside, as the field continues to be modulated by the legacy of French historiography. Within these academic discussions, a common analytical premise has emerged: its understanding as a form of aggression grounded in ‘sexual differentiation’, specifically targeting women, and aimed at

⁹ Yannick Ripa, ‘Armes d’hommes contre femmes désarmées: De la dimension sexuée de la violence dans la Guerre Civile espagnole’, in Cécile Dauphin and Arlette Farge (eds), *De la violence et des femmes* (Paris, 1997), pp. 131–45; Yannick Ripa, ‘La tonte purificatrice des républicaines pendant la guerre civile espagnole’, *Cahiers de l’IHTP*, 31 (1995), pp. 39–51.

¹⁰ Idem, ‘Armes d’hommes contre femmes désarmées’, p. 133.

¹¹ Maud Joly, ‘Las violencias sexuadas de la Guerra Civil española: Paradigma para una lectura cultural del conflicto’, *Historia Social*, 61 (2008), pp. 89–107.

¹² González Duro, *Las rapadas*, p. 183.

¹³ Irene Abad, ‘Las dimensiones de la “represión sexuada” durante la dictadura franquista’, *Jerónimo Zurita*, 84 (2009), pp. 70–1.

¹⁴ The author here cites the words of Liz Kelly, ‘Wars against women: Sexual violence, sexual politics and the militarised state’, in Susie Jacobs, Ruth Jacobsen and Jennifer Marchbank (eds), *States of Conflict: Gender, Violence and Resistance* (New York, 2000), p. 45.

¹⁵ Abad, ‘Las dimensiones de la “represión sexuada” durante la dictadura franquista’, p. 71.

attacking or degrading those traits that are culturally and symbolically associated with femininity. Gender, therefore, remains the overarching interpretative lens through which such acts are understood. This reliance prompts a set of critical questions. If gender fundamentally structures both the logic of violence and its historiographical interpretation, why has the phenomenon been predominantly labelled as 'sexed' rather than 'gendered'? What explains the persistent classification of such acts as sexed violence? And more broadly, what conceptual or historical specificities render sexed violence a particularly relevant category in the Spanish context?

I will now turn to a closer examination of the works that have significantly shaped the ways in which violence against women during the Spanish Civil War has been conceptualized, with particular attention to the ambiguities arising from the interchangeable use of the terms 'sex' and 'gender'. In a later section, I will focus more specifically on sexual violence against women, drawing not only on historiographical contributions but also on legal, sociological and philosophical studies that have addressed this phenomenon in both wartime and peacetime contexts. The aim is to adapt these analytical perspectives to the Spanish case – particularly the issue of violence enacted on the basis of sexuality during the Civil War – in order to contribute greater conceptual clarity to the ongoing scholarly debate.

Conceptualizing violence against women

Despite the continuous development of new research and theoretical models, there is still no widely accepted definition of violence against women.¹⁶ This ambiguity becomes even more pronounced when gender is examined as a central, yet increasingly complex, category in relation to violence. The terms 'gender-based violence' and 'gendered violence' gained international prominence following the 1995 Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women. These concepts refer to both physical and psychological forms of violence directed against women on the basis of their gender, understood as a consequence of their historically subordinate position within patriarchally structured societies. Whereas initial definitions tended to portray women as the primary victims, more recent conceptualizations have broadened the understanding, framing it as directed against individuals 'on the basis of their gender' or as 'disproportionately affecting certain gender groups'.¹⁷

Although women and girls remain the most frequently affected, contemporary approaches also acknowledge the harm it inflicts on other individuals and communities. Moreover, this form of violence has increasingly been recognized as taking multiple forms, including intimate partner violence, sexual harassment, homophobic and transphobic violence, feminicide and a range of physical and psychological abuses such as assault, rape, threats, isolation, control or humiliation.¹⁸

In the Spanish context, considerable debate has emerged around the application of the term 'gender-based violence' (*violencia de género*) to describe violence inflicted against women. The core of the problem stems from the divergence between its legal conceptualization in Spain and the broader definitions articulated within

¹⁶ Walter S. DeKeseredy, *Violence against Women: Myths, Facts, Controversies* (Toronto, 2020), p. 4.

¹⁷ European Commission, 'What is gender-based violence?' (last modified 7 March 2024), <https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/gender-based-violence/what-gender-based-violence_en> [last accessed 16 February 2026].

¹⁸ Marylène Lieber, 'Gender-based violence and intersectionality: From theory to policy', *LIEPP Policy Brief*, no. 69 bis (2023).

international policy frameworks.¹⁹ Critics have pointed to its limited legal utility, arguing that the term is reductionist – frequently equated exclusively within couple relationships – thus failing to account for the full range and complexity of the ways in which violence against women is perpetrated.²⁰

Nevertheless, the legal concept coexists with more expansive, commonly used interpretations that are not as narrowly confined to intimate partner violence – likely shaped by broader international discourses. Therefore, some scholars have advocated for the continued use of the term precisely because it draws attention to the sociocultural constructions of masculinity and femininity, as well as to the differential allocation of roles and spaces rooted in patriarchal systems.²¹

Although often described as a ‘complex phenomenon’, some definitions have underscored its broad scope, conceptualizing it as a continuum of violence – ranging from symbolic to physical – that target women precisely on the basis of their gender, ‘for the very fact of being women’.²² However, certain perspectives have advocated for caution, specifically pointing to the fact that although violence against women constitutes a significant manifestation of gender-based violence, it does not fully encompass the category. Therefore, it should not be exclusively relied upon to define violence against women.²³

What appears to be evident is that the study of this type of violence in the context of the Spanish Civil War, particularly its articulation as a historiographical category, presents notable methodological and interpretative challenges. Scholarly approaches have diversified the ways in which this reality is conceptualized, all of which foreground the ‘gendered nature’ of the violence, yet differ significantly in their underlying assumptions, interpretive lenses and analytical emphases. It has been framed as *violencia de género* (gender-based violence)²⁴ or *represión de género* (‘gendered repression’),²⁵ and certain voices have chosen *represión femenina* (‘female repression’),²⁶ *represión franquista contra la mujer* (‘Francoist repression against

¹⁹ Margarita Roig Torres, ‘La delimitación de la “violencia de género”: Un concepto espinoso’, *Estudios Penales y Criminológicos*, 32 (2012).

²⁰ Raquel López Merchán, ‘La violencia contra la mujer: Evolución terminológica en España’, *Clio & Crimen* 12 (2015), pp. 109–24; Celia Amorós Puente, ‘Conceptualizar es politizar’, in Patricia Lorenzo, María Luisa Maqueda and Ana Rubio (eds), *Género, violencia y derecho* (Valencia, 2008), pp. 15–26.

²¹ Anna Aguado, ‘Violencia de género, sujeto femenino i ciudadanía’, *L’Espill* 19 (2005), pp. 59–68.

²² Marta Plaza Velasco, ‘Sobre el concepto de “violencia de género”: Violencia simbólica, lenguaje, representación’, *Extravío*, 2 (2007), pp. 132–47, at p. 134.

²³ Adriana Cases Sola, *El género de la violencia: Mujeres y violencias en España (1923–1936)* (Málaga, 2016), pp. 71–5; Mari Milagros Rivera Garretas, ‘La violencia contra las mujeres no es violencia de género’, *Duoda*, 21 (2001), pp. 37–42, at pp. 38–9.

²⁴ Sofía Rodríguez López, ‘La violencia de género como arma de guerra’, in Encarnación Barranquero (ed.), *Mujeres en la Guerra Civil y el Franquismo: violencia, silencio y memoria de los tiempos difíciles* (Málaga, 2010), pp. 23–46; Julián Chaves Palacios, ‘Franquismo y violencia de género en Extremadura’, in Egidio León and Montes Salguero, *Mujer, franquismo y represión*, pp. 147–70; François Godicheau, ‘Les violences de la guerre d’Espagne’, *Revue d’Histoire de la Shoah* 189/2 (2008), pp. 413–30, at p. 414.

²⁵ Laura Muñoz-Encinar, ‘Unearthing gendered repression: An analysis of the violence suffered by women during the Civil War and Franco’s dictatorship in southwestern Spain’, *World Archaeology*, 51/5 (2019), pp. 759–77; Queraalt Solé, ‘Executed women, assassinated women: Gender repression in the Spanish Civil War and the violence of the rebels’, in Ofelia Ferrán and Lisa Hilbink (eds), *Legacies of Violence in Contemporary Spain: Exhuming the Past, Understanding the Present* (Abingdon, 2016), pp. 69–93; Ángeles Egidio León, ‘Ser roja y ser mujer: Condicionantes y desencadenantes de la represión de género’, in Egidio León and Montes Salguero, *Mujer, Franquismo y Represión*, pp. 15–41; Julio Prada Rodríguez, ‘La represión de género en Galicia’, in Egidio León and Montes Salguero, *Mujer, Franquismo y Represión*, pp. 193–214.

²⁶ Fernando Hernández Holgado, ‘Cárcel de Ventas: Los mecanismos de la represión femenina. Entre la historia y la memoria’, in Mary Nash (ed.), *Represión, resistencias, memoria: las mujeres bajo la dictadura Franquista* (Granada, 2013), pp. 53–62.

women')²⁷ or *represión sexual* ('sexual repression').²⁸ But predominantly, this typology of violence has been framed through the lens of its sexed dimension²⁹ – not solely against Republican women but also perpetrated by Republican forces.³⁰

In the very first page of her path-breaking work *In Body and Soul: Being a Woman in Franco's Time*, Aurora Morcillo presents an analysis of the 'sexed images' of femininity under Francoism – a notion she herself qualifies as one 'of gender' (*de género*). She subsequently affirms that her study aims to historicize the '*nación sexuada*' – a term which, in the footnote, is translated into English as 'gendered nation'.³¹

In fact, the terms 'sexed violence' or 'sexed repression' have typically been rendered into English directly as 'gendered violence'.³² A closer examination of these conceptual formulations invites critical questions: are these analytical categories interchangeable, or are they hierarchically arranged? Might the sexed dimension of violence be understood as the specific form that 'gender-based violence' adopts within the context of the Spanish Civil War? On this matter, Sarah Leggott concludes:

Unlike the broader term 'gender-based violence' [*violencia de género*], 'sexed repression' [*represión sexual*] refers more explicitly to practices of torture that target the female body directly. This includes rape, as well as other methods specifically designed to inflict direct violence upon women's bodies.³³

Accordingly, the notion of a sexed dimension may be understood as the particularity of 'gender-based violence' within the context of the Spanish Civil War. Drawing on Joly's definition of its manifestation through systematic 'repression', Leggott further substantiates that certain forms of violence were indeed 'targeted directly at parts of the body associated with femininity and motherhood'.³⁴ As previously discussed, this has widely served as a conceptual foundation for the development and application of this particular terminology.

Nevertheless, I argue that the conceptualization of such violence as sexed has been problematic from the very beginning. While I acknowledge the limitations of subsuming violence against women exclusively under the broad and often vague label of 'gender-based violence', I believe that the vocabulary adopted has privileged 'sex' over 'gender', thereby contributing to the conceptual conflation of both terms and reinforcing a lack of analytical precision. In this light, the very formulation of violence as having a sexed dimension reveals certain internal tensions.

²⁷ María de los Llanos Pérez Gómez, 'La represión franquista contra la mujer, ¿una asignatura pendiente?', *Historia Actual Online*, 57 (2022), pp. 173–90.

²⁸ Carmen Guillén Lorente, 'Historiografía de la represión sexual femenina durante el franquismo: Una historia inacabada', in *VII Encuentro de Jóvenes Investigadoras e Investigadores en Historia Contemporánea* (Universidad de Granada, 2019); Gutmaro Gómez Bravo, 'Represión sexual y control social: Nuevas miradas sobre el franquismo', *El País*, 16 April 2025.

²⁹ For the literature on this matter, see the text and references noted above.

³⁰ Adriana Cases Sola, 'La violencia sexual en la retaguardia republicana durante la Guerra Civil española', *Historia Actual Online*, 34 (2014), pp. 69–80, at p. 69.

³¹ Aurora G. Morcillo, *En cuerpo y alma: Ser mujer en tiempos de Franco* (Madrid, 2015), p. 7.

³² Ignacio Fernández de Mata, 'Rapadas. Public shaming as a means of subjection: Cultural origins, continuities and changes up to the Spanish Civil War', *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies*, 31/1 (2025), pp. 97–115; Gina Herrmann, '"They didn't rape me": Traces of gendered violence and sexual injury in the testimonies of Spanish Republican Women survivors of the Franco dictatorship', in *Tapestry of Memory* (Abingdon, 2013), pp. 77–95. On its opening page, the latter text translates Maud Joly reference to *violencias sexuadas* in this way.

³³ Sarah Leggott, 'De Ventas a Ravensbrück: memorias de la represión sexual en los testimonios de Mercedes Núñez Targa', in José Colmeiro and Alfredo Martínez-Expósito (eds), *Repensar los estudios ibéricos desde la Periferia* (Venezia, 2019), pp. 35–48, at p. 36.

³⁴ Sarah Leggott, 'Represión de género y violencia sexual en la España franquista: Los testimonios de Mercedes Núñez Targa', *Cauce*, 42 (2019), pp. 61–74. Here., at p. 62.

Building on Rouquet and Voldman's insights, Maud Joly calls for an analytical framework that places 'sexual difference' as a central axis in the constitution of historical subjectivities and identifies 'sexual identity' as a significant factor in judicial practices of punishment and judgment.³⁵ Within this perspective, what is framed as sexed violence is commonly understood as violence directed at bodily features associated with femininity. However, a closer examination suggests that many of these so-called 'sexed elements' are not reducible to biological sex but rather emerge from culturally encoded understandings of gender – such as, for instance, the symbolic and punitive targeting of women's hair, often used as a tool of humiliation and erasure of feminine identity.³⁶

The interchangeable use of 'sex' (*sexo*) and 'gender' (*género*) in both academic and colloquial contexts has contributed to conceptual confusion. In the late 1980s, Joan W. Scott advocated for the use of 'gender' as a 'category of historical analysis', following the path of other American feminist theorists who emphasized that distinctions between men and women are socially constructed rather than biologically determined.³⁷ While the term 'sex' refers to the biological distinctions between men and women, 'gender' encompasses the culturally constructed roles, expectations and power relations ascribed to individuals based on those biological differences.³⁸

The act of forcibly shaving women's heads was a deliberate attack on one of the most culturally charged emblems of femininity.³⁹ In this context, hair functioned as a gendered signifier, and its removal operated as a mechanism of domination aimed at stripping women of their social identity, dignity and symbolic capital as gendered subjects. Such practices reveal that what is commonly referred to as sexed violence often revolves around the destruction of gendered representations rather than targeting what would more accurately be described as sexed attributes rooted in the biological differentiation of bodies.

This observation also prompts a broader inquiry into the nature of sexual violence itself. Within the framework of the so-called 'sexed dimension of violence' during the Spanish Civil War, scholars have argued that punitive practices directed specifically at Republican women included forms of violence that were primarily sexual in nature, most notably rape.⁴⁰ Recent feminist debates have revisited this notion, particularly concerning the complex entanglement of sexuality and violence in contexts of armed conflict.

In the following section, I will explore how sexual violence has been conceptualized in postmodern feminist theory and reflect on how these perspectives help illuminate the Spanish case. Special attention will be paid to how the use of language within the 'sexed repression' analytical category – particularly in relation to gender and violence – may have further obscured or complicated academic interpretations of rape.

³⁵ Joly, 'Las violencias sexuadas de la guerra civil española', pp. 89, 90. Here, Joly develops a point made in François Rouquet and Danièle Voldman, 'Présentation', *Les Cahiers de l'Institut d'Histoire du Temps Présent*, 31 (1995), pp. 5–10, at p. 6: 'consider sexual difference as a potential determinant in the processes of judgment or punishment; apply a sexed reading of politics.'

³⁶ This violence has been directly rendered in English as a matter of 'sexual' violence in Gina Herrmann, 'Reenactments of Remedios Montero: Oral history of a Spanish guerrillera in testimony, fiction, and film', *HIOL*, 10 (2012), pp. 123–38, at p. 132.

³⁷ Joan W. Scott, 'Gender: A useful category of historical analysis', *The American Historical Review*, 91/5 (1986), pp. 1053–75, at p. 1054.

³⁸ This conceptual distinction has played a pivotal role in advancing and critically reassessing the use of such categories within more recent theoretical frameworks, particularly queer theory. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 2006).

³⁹ Fabrice Virgili, *La France 'virile': Des femmes tondues à la Libération* (Paris, 2004), pp. 230–1.

⁴⁰ Abad, 'Las dimensiones de la "represión sexuada" durante la dictadura franquista', pp. 71, 84, 85.

Rethinking sexual violence through gendered frameworks

Within definitions of sexed violence, it is often concluded that sex becomes the site of violent inscription in wartime.⁴¹ Over the past few decades, this framework has drawn increasing interest from feminist scholars who examine how gendered forms of violence take shape in and through the body in both wartime and peacetime contexts. Within this evolving field of inquiry, the notion that sexual violence is inherently sexed has come under particular scrutiny. Scholars such as Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern have been especially influential in challenging this assumption. Their work distinguishes between two main explanatory approaches to sexual violence in armed conflict: the so-called ‘sexed story’ and the ‘gendered story’.⁴² The former corresponds to what is commonly known as the ‘biological urge’ or ‘substitution theory’, which interprets rape as a ‘byproduct of war’ rooted in men’s presumed biologically driven heterosexual needs. Within this logic, sexual violence emerges because soldiers, lacking access to women due to war conditions, resort to forced sex as a substitute for consensual sexual relations.⁴³ This perspective presents certain limitations. First, it opens the way for the idea that sexual violence can be mitigated by increasing soldiers’ access to women, whether through more generous periods of leave or, in extreme cases, through organized systems such as the ‘comfort women’ during the Second World War. Second, it is grounded in the assumption that war temporarily lifts the social restraints that normally curb men’s behaviour, allowing supposedly innate sexual impulses to surface. From this viewpoint, violence and chaos are seen as conditions in which all men could, in theory, become potential perpetrators, as their ‘natural’ drives would no longer be moderated by civilization or societal norms.⁴⁴

Initially one of the most influential explanatory models within early feminist theory, this sexed biologically deterministic view – framing wartime rape as the outcome of ‘uncontrollable’ male sexual urges – was later critically contested for naturalizing male aggression and overlooking the structural and symbolic dimensions of violence. Critiques of this earlier model emphasize that it naturalizes and therefore depoliticizes rape in war, ultimately diverting attention from efforts to prevent it. In contrast to this view, the ‘gendered story’ offers an opposing framework. This growing number of scholars argue that rape in conflict settings functions as an effective tool of humiliation and intimidation. Rather than viewing the military as a space in which boys fulfil an assumed ‘natural’ male potential, they highlight how this ‘militarised masculinity’ is learned and internalized through training practices specifically designed to produce soldiers who are able – and expected – to kill

⁴¹ ‘As sex, we also understand the sexual organs and the parts of the body that our societies consider as relevant in sexuality or characteristics of sexual difference’: Fabrice Virgili, ‘Le sexe blessé’, in François Rouquet, Fabrice Virgili and Danièle Voldman (eds), *Amours, guerres et sexualités: 1914–1945* (Paris, 2007), pp. 138–44, at p. 138; Cited in Joly, ‘Las violencias sexuales de la Guerra Civil española’, p. 89; Abad, ‘Las dimensiones de la “represión sexual” durante la dictadura franquista’, p. 71; Adriana Cases Sola and Teresa María Ortega López, ‘La investigación sobre la represión femenina y violencia sexual en el franquismo: Evolución historiográfica’, *Ayer*, 118/2 (2020), pp. 347–61, at p. 359.

⁴² See the chapter ‘Sex/Gender Violence’ in Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern, *Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War? Perceptions, Prescriptions, Problems in the Congo and Beyond* (London, 2013), pp. 12–41. Also in Ruth Seifert, ‘Vicissitudes of gender as an analytical category: Sexual violence in armed conflicts revisited’, in Gaby Zipfel, Regina Mühlhäuser and Kirsten Campbell (eds), *In Plain Sight: Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict* (New Delhi, 2019), pp. 257–77, at p. 259.

⁴³ This perspective is often referred to as the ‘substitution’ argument, a widely cited explanatory model in military contexts that frames sexual violence as a response to soldiers’ lack of access to consensual sexual relations. See Elisabeth Jean Wood, ‘Armed groups and sexual violence: When is wartime rape rare?’, *Politics & Society*, 37/1 (2009), pp. 131–61, at p. 135.

⁴⁴ Eriksson Baaz and Stern, *Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War?*, pp. 18–19; Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (New York, 1975), pp. 31–3.

in defence of their nation.⁴⁵ According to this line of reasoning, the form of masculinity cultivated within the military valorizes violence, discipline, obedience and domination, and recruits are encouraged to internalize a hyper-masculine soldierly persona (*macho* soldier). This dynamic is strengthened through group bonding practices, which can include forms of collective violence – even, in some contexts, collective sexual aggression – that further consolidate group bonding.⁴⁶

From this perspective, rape is not treated as an inevitable outcome of war but as a contingent form of violence shaped by specific configurations of power. On this matter, Renée Heberle has observed that the breakdown of institutional or social order may create conditions in which ‘sexualised cruelty’ becomes more visible, yet disorder alone does not explain it. Rather, sexual violence should be understood as a dynamic rooted in gendered structures and deliberately weaponized in specific ways during conflict.⁴⁷

Thereby, the ‘gendered story’ of sexual violence stands in necessary opposition to the ‘sexed story’.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, a comparative analysis between the frameworks of ‘sexed violence/repression’ in the Spanish Civil War and the ‘gendered story’ theory reveals a number of overlapping conceptual features. While the latter has been advanced as a contemporary lens that emphasizes the performative and symbolic dimensions of ‘gender’ – rather than ‘sex’ – during wartime, many of its analytical elements find resonance in earlier conceptualizations of sexed violence within the Spanish case. Maud Joly introduced the notion *cuerpos sexuados violentados* (‘violated sexed bodies’) to describe the specific targeting of Republican women. In her analysis, these bodies became politically and symbolically charged spaces, conceptualized as a kind of ‘battlefront’ where violence was not only enacted but inscribed.⁴⁹

This line of argumentation has been further elaborated within an international theoretical context. Here, scholars have highlighted how the merging of corporeal and national identity leads to the symbolic nationalization of certain bodies – particularly those of women. Violence inflicted upon them thus constitutes not only an individual assault but also an attack on the ‘national body’ as a representation of the collective.⁵⁰ Authors working in this tradition have emphasized that these dynamics are deeply embedded in gendered constructions: since women are often cast as symbolic bearers of ethno-national identity through their roles as biological, cultural and social reproducers of the community, the rape of ‘enemy’ women can also function as an attempt to undermine or destroy the very fabric of the society they are seen to embody.⁵¹

Interpretations of sexed violence within the Spanish context have often understood acts of aggression – particularly those directed at Republican women – not solely as

⁴⁵ Eriksson Baaz and Stern, *Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War?*, p. 20. On the process of how man learn to be ‘masculine’ and violent in the military, see Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare* (New York, 1999).

⁴⁶ Eriksson Baaz and Stern, *Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War?*, p. 20.

⁴⁷ Renée Heberle, ‘Can masculinity survive the end of sexualised violence?’, in Mühlhäuser and Kirsten Campbell, *In Plain Sight*, pp. 160–1.

⁴⁸ Eriksson Baaz and Stern, *Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War?*, p. 22.

⁴⁹ Joly, ‘Las violencias sexuadas de la Guerra Civil española’, p. 95; On the other side, Alcalde urged caution in the use of such rhetorical notions, arguing that these categories provide limited analytical insight and risk distorting historical reality. Ángel Alcalde, ‘Queipo de Llano, Koestler, y las violaciones de mujeres en la Guerra Civil española’, in Conxita Mir Curcó and Ángela Cenarro (eds), *Mujeres, género y violencia en la Guerra Civil y la dictadura de Franco* (Valencia, 2021), pp. 215–43, at p. 85.

⁵⁰ Seifert, ‘Vicissitudes of gender as an analytical category’, pp. 261–62; Ruth Stanley, ‘Violencia sexualizada en tiempos de guerra: discursos hegemónicos y orden de género’, *Cuadernos de Antropología Social*, 25 (2007), pp. 7–27.

⁵¹ Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern, ‘Why do soldiers rape? Masculinity, violence, and sexuality in the armed forces in the Congo (DRC)’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 53/2 (2009), pp. 495–518, at p. 500.

expressions of 'sexed domination', but also as mechanisms of political repression. These women were frequently targeted as embodiments of a dual transgression: a defiance of 'normative sexual roles' and an ideological opposition to the regime. Violence against them thus functioned as both a sexed and politicized act, reinforcing their constructed identity as 'enemies' of the nation.⁵² Once again, scholars working within this framework emphasize how gendered expectations – whereby women and girls are associated with stereotypically 'feminine' attributes and men and boys with 'masculine' ones – structure these dynamics. In this sense, rape can be conceptualized as a symbolic means of punishing, humiliating or disciplining women perceived as 'subversive', whose deviation from prescribed models of femininity was understood as a threat to national order and identity.⁵³

Also, the notion of sexed violence raises certain conceptual ambiguities. The term can suggest a biologically grounded explanation, even though the forms of harm it seeks to describe often resonate more clearly with international debates that situate this violence within gendered structures. These approaches highlight how such acts draw on socially constructed meanings of femininity and masculinity, rather than on sexual difference itself. This ultimately points to a contradiction: as noted above, many of the practices described as sexed violence in the Spanish context seem to correspond more directly to symbolic and politically charged constructions of gender – such as the policing of female transgression or the targeting of women's hair. In light of these considerations, it may be useful to revisit the terminology employed to conceptualize the violence inflicted upon both Republican and non-Republican women during the conflict. The following section approaches this question through recent developments in feminist postmodern scholarship and theories of sexuality.

Bodies, sexuality and the politics of violence

Theorization around the sexualization of bodies has emerged from distinct epistemological traditions that seek to explain how corporeality is inscribed with meaning through systems of sexuality. Rather than assuming sexuality as a given or biologically determined fact, these perspectives examine the ways in which bodies are constituted as sexual through historical, cultural and discursive formations. A more nuanced conceptual engagement with the category of sexed violence entails examining the symbolic and political meanings attributed to violence as it pertains to sexuality, particularly when enacted upon bodies across both wartime and peacetime contexts.

While bodies are generally classified as sexed in a biological sense – that is, either male or female – they are 'sexualized' through a complex interplay of social, cultural and historical forces.⁵⁴ This distinction has been shaped by two major theoretical traditions. The first, rooted in psychoanalytic thought and associated with figures such as Sigmund Freud, advances an essentialist understanding of sexuality in which sex is viewed as an innate biological drive – particularly for men – and as a quasi-instinctual force guiding human behaviour. Within this logic, men appear as active subjects propelled by 'natural' urges, whereas women are positioned as passive recipients of male desire. The second tradition, emerging from more recent critical approaches

⁵² Joly, 'Las violencias sexuadas de la Guerra Civil española', p. 95; Abad, 'Las dimensiones de la "represión sexuada" durante la dictadura franquista', pp. 70–1; Adriana Cases Sola, 'The enemy's women or women enemies? Violence against women during the Spanish Civil War', in Francisco J. Leira Castiñeira and John Sakkas (eds), *Patterns of Violence behind the Lines in Europe's Civil Wars* (Cham, 2025), pp. 279–300.

⁵³ Cynthia Enloe, *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives* (Berkeley, CA, 2000), pp. 123–4; Eriksson Baaz and Stern, *Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War?*, p. 21.

⁵⁴ Kylie Stephen, 'Sexualized bodies', in Mary Evans and Ellie Lee (eds), *Real Bodies: A Sociological Introduction* (London, 2002), pp. 29–45, at pp. 29–30.

and most notably influenced by the work of Michel Foucault, strongly contests these essentialist narratives. Instead, it conceptualizes sex and sexuality as historically produced categories, shaped by shifting cultural and political dynamics. From this perspective, bodies are not only *sexed* but are rendered *sexualized* through contingent configurations of power specific to particular times and contexts. Consequently, concepts such as sex, gender and sexuality acquire meanings that vary across settings and historical moments, producing understandings of ‘sexualized bodies’ that cannot be separated from their broader sociopolitical environments.⁵⁵

Similarly, the terms ‘sexed’ and ‘sexualized’ have often been treated as interchangeable in academic literature, though they refer to distinct concepts. Being sexed denotes the possession of a biological sex, encompassing anatomical features, reproductive functions and internal attributes such as hormonal drives and emotional responses.⁵⁶ In contrast, ‘sexualized’ refers, firstly, ‘to attribute sex or gender to (a person or thing); to endow with male or female characteristics’, and second to ‘making (a person or thing) sexual; to endow with erotic nature or character’.⁵⁷ Unlike ‘sexed’, which refers to biological categorization, ‘sexualized’ traits arise through external processes, constructed through the lens of social perception, cultural expectations and gendered desire.

Building on this distinction, Foucault’s theorization of the body has enabled feminist scholars to reject deterministic notions of sex and gender, reframing the body as a product of historical and political processes.⁵⁸ This theoretical approach has been particularly productive in advancing the understandings of how bodies become targets of violence – not simply because of their biological sex, but because of the meanings ascribed to them within specific cultural and political contexts. Such a framework facilitates an analysis of ‘sexualized violence’ that moves beyond essentialist assumptions and instead attends to how bodies are rendered vulnerable through contingent constructions – such as, those that have been made legible as female, deviant, transgressive or otherwise threatening to established norms. Crucially, it shifts the focus from inherent bodily characteristics to the discursive and social mechanisms through which certain bodies are marked, regulated and exposed to harm. It underscores how violence is not merely enacted upon bodies but is constitutive of the very ways in which they are socially produced and differentiated. Therefore, the conceptualization of sexualized violence itself highlights how such violence is deeply rooted in wider structural and systemic forms of inequality.

Jana Schäfer offers a broad definition of sexualized or sexualizing violence, describing it as any dehumanizing action that undermines an individual’s ability to inhabit the world on their own sexual, relational or reproductive terms.⁵⁹ This encompasses both direct and indirect forms of harm, including acts, threats or structural constraints that sexualize or desexualize the body. Within these processes, the female body can be rendered a sexualized object, instrumentalized for purposes of ridicule, control or subjugation.⁶⁰ Ruth Seifert has approached sexualized violence through a cultural lens, with particular attention to its wartime manifestations. She has argued that such violence is a profoundly social act that must be understood

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Allyson Jule, ‘Gender theory’, in Alex C. Michalos (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research* (Dordrecht, 2014), pp. 2464–6, at p. 2464.

⁵⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*, ‘sexualize (v.)’, sense 1 and 2’, July 2023, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4917749175>> [last accessed 16 February 2026].

⁵⁸ Stephen, ‘Sexualized bodies’, p. 33.

⁵⁹ Jana Schäfer, *What Is Sexualized Violence?: Intersectional Readings* (London, 2024), p. 35.

⁶⁰ See the case in Elissa Mailänder, ‘Making sense of a rape photograph: Sexual violence as social performance on the eastern front, 1939–1944’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 26/3 (2017), pp. 489–520, at p. 489.

within its specific cultural and historical conditions. In this sense, she moved away from anthropological explanations – whether framed as inherently human or inherently male – and rejected interpretations that cast it as pathological or as an consequence of armed conflict.⁶¹ On this matter, Paul Kirby has examined the pervasive presence of sexuality and sexualized violence in war, analysing how the affective dimensions of embodied harm are transmitted, reshaped and embedded within broader cultural narratives and the construction of political identities.⁶² Marianne Braig's analysis of rape is particularly valuable for emphasizing the systemic nature of violence and the continuities that link periods of war and peace. She contended that such acts should not be interpreted as phenomena confined to the temporal boundaries of armed conflict. Instead, they reveal enduring social structures and conditions that both precede and transcend the outbreak and conclusion of military hostilities.⁶³

Although the category of sexualized violence (*violencia sexualizada*) has been widely theorized in international scholarship – especially when addressing violence inflicted against women in militarized contexts – its application remains notably absent in the Spanish case, particularly in studies of the Spanish Civil War. While Yannick Ripa has drawn attention to the role of medical discourse in Francoist Spain in contributing to the 'sexualisation' of war, she has nonetheless conceptualized the bodily violence inflicted upon women as 'sexed'.⁶⁴ Similarly, while Sarah Leggott has employed the terms 'sexed' and 'sexualized' as equivalent descriptors within her analytical framework, her reflection on the violence inflicted upon Republican women during the Spanish Civil War nonetheless proves particularly insightful.⁶⁵ It brings to light the extent to which this violence aligns with the conceptual framework of sexualized violence, as understood in postmodern feminist scholarship. It acknowledges the inherently gendered nature of war, which becomes evident through particular forms of violence, specifically those in which sexuality is instrumentalized as a means of asserting domination and reinforcing power structures.⁶⁶ Leggott draws on Brigitte Halbmayr's analysis of the violence perpetrated by the Nazis against Jewish women: she chose the term 'sexualized violence' to emphasize that male violence against females constitutes a display of power on the part of the perpetrator, manifested through sexuality and encompassing various forms of violence with sexual connotations, including humiliation, intimidation and destruction.⁶⁷ Her perspective enables a conceptualization of this form of violence as targeting the most intimate aspects of a person:

This definition of the term covers direct physical expressions of violence that are bodily attacks, an unauthorized crossing of body boundaries. They range from flagrant

⁶¹ Ruth Seifert, 'Sexualized violence and the cultural construction of war', in Tuba Inal and Merrill D. Smith (eds), *Rape Cultures and Survivors: An International Perspective*, Vol. I: *Rape Cultures and Their Manifestations* (Westport, CT, 2018), pp. 2–3.

⁶² Paul Kirby, 'The body weaponized: War, sexual violence and the uncanny', *Security Dialogue*, 51/2–3 (2020), pp. 211–30.

⁶³ Marianne Braig, 'Repensando los procesos de violencia en América Latina: la violencia sexualizada como violación de los derechos humanos', in Klaus Bodemer, Sabine Kurtenbach and Klaus Meschkat (eds), *Violencia y Regulación de Conflictos en América Latina* (Caracas, 2001), pp. 25–38.

⁶⁴ Ripa, 'La tonte purificatrice des républicaines pendant la guerre civile espagnole', p. 49.

⁶⁵ Leggott, 'Represión de género y violencia sexualizada en la España franquista', pp. 62–3. The same applies in Cases Sola, 'The enemy's women or women enemies?'.

⁶⁶ Yusta's analysis of female participation in guerrilla groups proves particularly compelling, especially in her understanding of 'sexuality as a weapon of repression': Mercedes Yusta, 'Hombres armados y mujeres invisibles: género y sexualidad en la guerrilla antifranquista (1936–1952)', *Ayer*, 110/2 (2018), pp. 285–310.

⁶⁷ Brigitte Halbmayr, 'Sexualized violence against women during Nazi "racial" persecution', in Sonja Hedgepeth and Rochelle Saidel (eds), *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust* (Waltham, MA, 2010), pp. 29–44.

sexual advances to rape. [...] This definition of sexualized violence also allows for the inclusion of indirect, often emotional expressions of violence, such as imposed public nakedness and accompanying feelings of shame, infringement on intimate space, deplorable hygienic conditions, leering stares, suggestive insults, and humiliating methods of physical examination.⁶⁸

A closer reading on Leggott's discussion suggests a more nuanced interpretation. While drawing parallels between the experiences of Jewish women under Nazism and those of Republican women during the Spanish Civil War requires careful qualification, the comparison she proposes nonetheless highlights an important conceptual convergence.⁶⁹ Several of the practices inflicted upon Republican women align more closely with Halbmayr's definition of sexualized violence, which encompasses a broader spectrum of coercive acts – physical, emotional and symbolic – than the more restrictive notion of sexed violence allows. A similar comparison has been advanced by Gina Herrmann, who argues that Jewish women were subjected to multiple forms of sexualized violence and gendered humiliation, forms of abuse that resonate strongly with those endured by Republican women both during the Spanish Civil War and throughout the Francoist dictatorship. Importantly, however, Herrmann was the first to conceptualize this violence explicitly through the lens of sexualization.⁷⁰

The experiences of these women have been the focus of extensive scholarly attention in recent decades. The forms of violence to which they were subjected – variously described as 'sexed' or 'gendered', whether treated as synonymous or distinguished through subtle conceptual nuances – exhibit characteristics that more closely correspond to contemporary interpretations informed by postmodern feminist theory. This approach conceptualizes this form of violence as one that operates through and upon sexuality, rejecting naturalizing explanations. Instead, it calls for an analysis grounded in the dynamics of gender, embodiment and power, foregrounding its socially constructed and systemic nature.

Conclusion

The forms of violence analysed throughout this article point to a fundamental characteristic of civil wars: their tendency to produce modes of aggression that are not only strategic, but also symbolic, disciplinary and identity based. Practices such as the public shaving of women's heads were not merely punitive; they were performative acts intended to shame, dehumanize, and mark the victims as transgressors of political and gender norms. In this sense, civil conflict generates forms of violence that are deeply entangled with questions of belonging, exclusion and the symbolic reordering of power. Recognizing this dimension is essential for understanding the specificity of violence directed at women during the Spanish Civil War, and for contributing to broader debates on how civil wars inscribe meaning through bodily practices.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 30.

⁶⁹ A comparative analysis of the violence inflicted on women under both fascist regimes can indeed be analytically productive; however, important contextual distinctions must be acknowledged. In the Nazi case, genocidal policies and a system of forced prostitution shaped forms of sexual violence that have no parallel in the Spanish context. For a more detailed examination of this issue, see Regina Mühlhäuser, *Sex and the Nazi Soldier: Violent, Commercial and Consensual Encounters during the War in the Soviet Union, 1941–45* (Edinburgh, 2021); Robert Sommer, 'Camp brothels: Forced sex labour in Nazi concentration camps', in Dagmar Herzog (ed.), *Brutality and Desire: War and Sexuality in Europe's Twentieth Century* (New York, 2009), pp. 168–96.

⁷⁰ 'Our understanding of how Spanish Republican women negotiated experiences of sexualized violence is greatly enhanced by excavating the Spanish case with the research tools and questions posed in the pioneering 2010 collection', *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust*. Herrmann, "'They didn't rape me'", p. 78. It is noteworthy that both Leggott and Herrmann draw upon the same publication.

Ultimately, the ways in which violence has been named and conceptualized reflect not only the discursive frameworks of the interwar period, but also the enduring struggles over how civil conflict and its gendered dimensions are remembered and represented today. In this context, the terminology of sexed violence and repression has played a crucial role in rendering visible a specific form of aggression that, during the Spanish Civil War, was overwhelmingly – and indeed exclusively – directed against women, particularly those aligned with the Republican side. However, its conceptual deployment is not without complications. While it has served as a necessary framework for foregrounding women's victimization and for exposing the power dynamics underpinning this form of aggression, the notion of a sexed dimension has tended to obscure the analytical distinction between sex and gender that has become central to contemporary feminist scholarship, raising important concerns about its conceptual clarity. Furthermore, the undifferentiated use of such terminology within historiographical discourse has contributed to ongoing ambiguities in the analysis of this form of violence. The interchangeable use of terms such as 'sexual', 'sexed', 'gendered' or 'feminine' – despite their shared intention to signal how this violence specifically affected women – reveals important differences in analytical scope and precision, pointing to the need for greater conceptual clarity in scholarly engagement with these categories.

Yet, my concern arises precisely in the use of the term 'sexed violence' (*violencia sexuada*) to categorize rape and other forms of sexual aggression. While this terminology was once useful in drawing attention to forms of repression that disproportionately affected women, it has been reconsidered by strands of postmodern feminist scholarship that emphasize the need for greater terminological precision. These critiques challenge explanatory models rooted in essentialist assumptions, particularly those that attribute wartime sexual violence to an innate 'male-biological impulse' or that portray it as an *unfortunate* yet *unavoidable* collateral effect of armed conflict. Such interpretations risk naturalizing and depoliticizing sexual violence, detaching it from the structural conditions and systems of power within which it takes shape. In the context of the Spanish Civil War, employing the category of sexed violence may inadvertently echo what has been described as the sexed story, a narrative that has been extensively nuanced by contemporary feminist theory.

Therefore, the adoption of the analytical category of sexualized violence could offer significant insights in the Spanish context. Such frameworks encourage an interpretation of this form of violence as intrinsically linked to overarching structures of patriarchal domination and systemic inequality. In doing so, they direct attention to the constructed nature of gender, the external gaze involved in processes of sexualization and the ways in which such violence operates across the porous boundaries between militarized and civilian spheres. In particular, it shifts the analytical focus toward the perpetrator, emphasizing how sexualization is imposed as a mechanism of domination and control. Moreover, this perspective enables a more layered reading of the continuities between violence enacted during times of conflict and that sustained in periods of ostensible peace.⁷¹ Far from constituting exceptional or isolated events, acts of wartime sexualized and sexual violence reflect deeply rooted, systemic mechanisms of gender-based subjugation and the ongoing reproduction of patriarchal power.

In light of the foregoing analysis, it is worth considering whether the forms of violence previously referred to as sexed violence (*violencia sexuada*) might more

⁷¹ Liz Kelly, *Surviving Sexual Violence* (Oxford, 1991).

accurately – and productively – be conceptualized under the term ‘sexualized violence’ (*violencia sexualizada*). Adopting this terminology would not only bring the Spanish scholarly debate into closer dialogue with current international approaches, but also promote greater analytical clarity by foregrounding the structural, performative and systemic dimensions of this form of harm. Ultimately, the integration of this conceptual language may serve as a critical step toward a more precise understanding of the gendered logics underpinning violence in both historical and contemporary contexts.