

## **How have the Peripheral Voices in *The War on Women*<sup>1</sup> been highlighted since its publication?**

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### **Abstract**

Sue Lloyd-Roberts' text, *The War on Women*<sup>2</sup> places itself on the 'frontline with the brave ones who fight back'<sup>3</sup>. Its chapters differentiate the women based on the location of their suffering, all of these differing in severity depending on the country and the laws put in place to protect them. Whilst the book emphasises the oppression women face it also depicts them in a courageous light, showing their attempts to make a change despite being from a society where their voices tend to be silenced. Throughout reading the book and conducting my own research I explored how the peripheral voices of women around the world have changed since Roberts' publication, which acts to illuminate the inequalities women face in society.

The chapter titled 'The Cruellest Cut: Female Genital Mutilation' provides an insight into communities where FGM is still prevalent. It usually occurs in groups and communities which employ a patriarchal structure. Roberts discusses its occurrence in Gambia; it's described as a way of mothers making money from their daughters and earning respect among their community. She follows Maimouna in her journey as she flees Gambia to avoid taking over her mother's role of village circumciser. Maimouna details the traumatic experience she went through when she was cut by

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<sup>1</sup> Sue Lloyd Roberts and Sarah Morris, *The War on Women*, (London, Simon and Schuster: 2016)

<sup>2</sup> Roberts and Morris, *The War on Women*

<sup>3</sup> Roberts and Morris, *The War on Women*

her own mother: 'Can you imagine holding down your five-year-old daughter, and they are cutting her and she is screaming and calling out 'Mum' and Mum is the one who is holding down your legs'.<sup>4</sup> The mothers believe that their daughters will never marry unless they are cut, those that aren't cut are deemed to be dirty or impure. This is practiced to ensure financial stability and as an attempt to give their children the best possible chance as they navigate the world.

In Somalia, as of July 2018, the first ever prosecution against female genital mutilation happened as a result of the death of a 10-year-old girl. They operate no laws against FGM and they are only protected under laws of not causing harm to another. Her death called campaigners to renew a law particularly on FGM which affects 98% of women in Somalia<sup>5</sup>, which according to U.N. data is the highest rate in the world. Somalia has since approved the anti- FGM bill. However, whilst the constitution does prohibit FGM it doesn't explicitly prohibit violence against women and girls in general.<sup>6</sup> This suggests that the law was passed more because of social pressures from campaigners than Somalia's belief of it being morally wrong, illustrating that a deep-rooted inequality against women still exists regardless of FGM being criminal. *The War on Women*<sup>7</sup> discusses what FGM is and how traumatic it is for young girls and the damage it does to families. Just this chapter alone highlights how silenced the peripheral voices of the young girls in Somalia are, but through Roberts' writing it gives them an opportunity to share their stories.

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<sup>4</sup> Roberts and Morris, *The War on Women*, p.10

<sup>5</sup> Kate Hodal, 'Somalia under renewed scrutiny over FGM after two more young girls die' *The Guardian*, (17 September 2018) < <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/sep/17/somalia-under-renewed-scrutiny-over-female-genital-mutilation-after-two-more-young-girls-die> > [accessed 13 January 2019]

<sup>6</sup> 28 Too Many, *Somalia: The Law and FGM*, (legal research) <[https://www.28toomany.org/static/media/uploads/Law%20Reports/somalia\\_law\\_report\\_\(july\\_2018\).pdf](https://www.28toomany.org/static/media/uploads/Law%20Reports/somalia_law_report_(july_2018).pdf)> [accessed 15 January 2019]

<sup>7</sup> Roberts and Morris, *The War on Women*

Roberts also writes of Ireland in chapter three, 'Ireland's Fallen Women: A Story of Religious Persecution'. It discusses the poor treatment of women in Magdalene Laundries. It follows Mary as she recounts the life-scarring experience of being a fallen woman in Ireland: 'Mary's crime for being cut off from the world, sexually abused and institutionalized for thirty years of her life was to have been born illegitimate'.<sup>8</sup> Being a fallen woman meant you had engaged in sex out of wedlock, which could have been both consensually or non-consensually, and further penalties applied to those women's children. These women are sent to homes where they are 'purified' by nuns and priests. They were in what was said to resemble a 'prison-like'<sup>9</sup> environment; facing sexual, physical and mental abuse from the nuns and priests. These women experienced a complete loss of identity through having to change their names<sup>10</sup> in order to maintain their silence in society. The woman Roberts interviews is still scarred by the physical and psychological abuse she endured 60 years ago. A lot of the babies birthed in the homes resulted in early death, (allegedly up to 800<sup>11</sup>) from the mistreatment, and without any access to contraception, this continued for many years.

Since Roberts' publication, Ireland has progressed further towards gender equality. As of May 2018, Ireland legalised abortion with a majority of 66.4% in the referendum, which isn't a vast majority showing that rest of Ireland deem it

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<sup>8</sup> Roberts and Morris, *The War on Women*, p.56

<sup>9</sup> Erin Blakemore, *How Ireland Turned 'Fallen Women' Into Slaves*, (2018) <<https://www.history.com/news/magdalene-laundry-ireland-asylum-abuse>> [accessed 15 January]

<sup>10</sup> Blakemore, *How Ireland Turned 'Fallen Women' Into Slaves*, (2018)

<sup>11</sup> Jamie Grierson, 'Mass grave of babies and children found at Tuam care home in Ireland', *The Guardian*, (3 March 2017) <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/03/mass-grave-of-babies-and-children-found-at-tuam-orphanage-in-ireland>> [accessed 15 January]

unacceptable. This legislation gives a voice back to the women who suffered at the Magdalene laundries. Finally, women have achieved autonomy over their own bodies without being deemed as impure or dirty as occurred in the past.

However, contrasting with this positive legislation, news media reports show that women still have a war to face in Ireland. In a rape trial in November 2018 in Northern Ireland the victim's underwear was used as a piece of evidence, suggesting that as a result of her 'thong with a lace front'<sup>12</sup> style underwear her behaviour had to be somewhat provocative, suggesting it was a reason why she was raped. The man was found not guilty, and the victim later committed suicide from the trauma the trial ignited. This caused wide controversy, with women protesting in the streets in their underwear to show that their choice of underwear is not consent. This victim blaming culture shows the controversy towards Ireland's ideal of gender equality.

Most of the atrocities women face are carried out under the law, meaning there is either no law in place to protect them or that abuse takes place under the eyes of authority, distorting statistics, hence the inclusion of qualitative data through Roberts' storytelling style used in the text; she recognises that whilst statistics can be shocking they are not as moving as the real stories and real names of real women in real places experiencing real pain and torture. It's this storytelling aspect of the text that reaches out to so many readers and explains its good reviews.

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<sup>12</sup> BBC News, 'Irish outcry over teenager's underwear used in rape trial', *BBC News*, (14 November 2018) <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-46207304>> [accessed 15 January]

After conducting research on some of the stories and tragedies read about in *The War on Women*<sup>13</sup> I found that the sad reality is that the reason I had never heard of some of these stories is that they go unreported, making the silenced voices of these women even quieter. Three years since its publication it still remains relevant: whilst some laws have changed it doesn't always stop atrocities happening to women. The text is important in showing societal attitudes towards women who are oppressed.

Reviews of the text praise Roberts' powerful voice that remains constant throughout her narrative: 'the author left this reviewer with the feeling of being inspired to act.'<sup>14</sup> The book leaves a lot of unanswered questions, but this signifies its purpose to highlight the collection of stories and to show that they are real and current. The text addresses those that believe Feminism has been and gone with women getting the right to vote in almost all countries around the world; it addresses the suffering that goes beyond the white, middle class, westernised woman. Examining Feminism through an intersectional lens is vital to fully understand the struggles of women around the world.

Whilst Roberts' text does a good job of highlighting global inequality and struggle women face not much has changed since its publication; but how much can be achieved by a female writer in a patriarchal society? *The War on Women* notes that the odds don't seem to be in women's favour: statistically according to UN figures in March 2018: 'Women around the world aged 15-44 are more at risk from rape and

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<sup>13</sup> Roberts and Morris, *The War on Women*

<sup>14</sup> Patrycja Dlugosz- Stoetges, 'Book Review: The War on Women: And the Brave Ones Who Fight Back', *Global Policy*, < <https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/07/12/2016/book-review-war-women-and-brave-ones-who-fight-back>> [accessed 15 January]

domestic violence than from cancer, car accidents, war and malaria'.<sup>15</sup> With shocking statistics such as these existing has society really moved on from the dystopia that Roberts writes of?

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