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Unsilenced: An Exhibition about Sexual Violence in Conflict

This paper provides an overview to the development process of the temporary exhibition entitled: *Unsilenced: Sexual Violence in Conflict*, held at Imperial War Museum London from 23 May - 2 November 2025. Divided into four main sections, this paper discusses the initial development, audience research, design process and content selection.

Development

The Imperial War Museum (IWM) was founded on 5 March 1917, during the First World War. At the time it was recognised that Britain and its then Empire should remember those who had fought and died in the conflict, showcasing both the military and civilian experience of the war. With the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 and the Korean War in 1953, the museum's remit was extended to include all conflicts in which British and now Commonwealth forces had been involved in since 1914. As such, the museum has a unique collection containing documents, sound recordings, artworks, photographs, films, uniforms and objects from the 20th and 21st century. IWM has grown to encompass five sites across the UK, with two dedicated museums and three historic sites, the museum is committed to documenting the experience of war and conflict and its impact on people's lives.

In 2015, IWM began work to redevelop its permanent Second World War and Holocaust galleries at IWM London. During this project, my colleagues came across many examples of conflict related sexual violence in the collection. It became clear that IWM needed a dedicated exhibition to explore this under-represented aspect of war and conflict. Colleagues began initial research and discussions with academics and experts with aim to open a temporary exhibition in 2021. However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic our temporary exhibition programme was delayed by several years. It wasn't until 2023 that work on the exhibition resumed with an opening date of 2025.

It was at this point I joined the project. The first task was to re-establish the connections made with academics, journalists and experts who work with victims and survivors. We discussed the current discourse surrounding conflict related sexual violence, the impact of the #MeToo movement and increased public awareness of sexual violence in general. As a result of these discussions, an advisory panel was formed which is standard practice for exhibitions at IWM.

For every exhibition at IWM a series of aims are established at the beginning of the project. For *Unsilenced* they were as follows:

- Create understanding about why sexual violence in conflict occurs.
- Use case studies to explore historical precedents, patterns and manifestations of sexual violence in conflict.
- Consider the contexts and intersectional complications around sexual violence in conflict, that affects individuals and societies. It is important to note that sexual violence doesn't happen in a vacuum.
- Create balance with stories of survival, positivity, reconciliation and peace as well as victimhood and brutality.

- Explore challenging content and material in the museum context and position IWM as a place and space for those conversations.
- Consider the inclusion of voices of those with lived experience.

Audience Research

It is believed that IWM is the first UK national museum to have a dedicated exhibition exploring conflict related sexual violence. It was therefore important to determine what our audiences knew about conflict related sexual violence, whether they were interested in visiting an exhibition about it, and most importantly – what they needed from IWM to be comfortable during their visit. To that end, IWM carried out formative audience research with the help of research company- Curioser.

Given the subject matter, Curioser decided to run the interviews in pairs. Each interviewee was invited to bring a partner, friend or spouse, hopefully creating a more comfortable atmosphere to hold discussions. This also ensured participants had someone to debrief with. The participants were a mixture of genders, ages and ethnicities, some of whom had previously visited IWM and others who had never been before.

The interview responses provided IWM with a lot of useful information. They showed that there was a significant interest in the topic amongst participants. That sexual violence was perceived as endemic in global societies and conflicts and yet it had rarely been explored. There were concerns raised about the emotional experience of the exhibition, but this was primarily related to the explicit content visitors might encounter. Participants were prepared to feel

challenged but not traumatised. Given the challenging subject matter, some participants raised concerns about having the 'confidence' or the 'right language' to be able to engage with the subject. There was a strong desire to have clear content warnings and descriptions before people entered the exhibition. Finally, the participants felt it was important to leave the exhibition with a sense of hope, that it was just as important to hear stories of survival and justice. Many of these findings cemented the exhibition aims and informed the development process about how to implement them.

With regards to visitors perceived 'lack of confidence', an introductory film was assembled. This would be the first space visitors entered in the exhibition. The film consisted of interviews with five people, a mix of academics, journalists and those who work with victims and survivors, asking them broad questions about conflict related sexual violence:

- What is sexual violence in conflict?
- Who is affected?
- Who are the perpetrators?
- Does sexual violence in conflict still happen today?
- Why are we talking about this now?

A specific glossary for the exhibition was compiled; this was free for visitors to pick up before entering the exhibition. Whilst not all encompassing, it was designed to address the concern that visitors might not be familiar with some of the terminology included in the interpretation. A clear content warning was designed, detailing the topics discussed within the exhibition and a suggested age restriction - that it is not suitable for those under 16. This was clearly displayed on signage boards directing people towards the exhibition entrance.

The exhibition team had also identified the need to balance stories of survival and justice with those of victimhood and brutality. This audience research finding solidified plans for the final spaces of the exhibition and the types of stories featured. It was anticipated that visitors would have further questions, need additional support, or a reflective space where they could process their thoughts about the exhibition. The final room of the exhibition was designed to be a reflective space. Another film played in the background, where visitors heard from the same five people in the introductory film. They answered questions such as, 'why it is important to listen to victims and survivors?' And 'how we can affect change?' Display boards with lists of support organisations was hung on the way out of the exhibition for anyone needed additional support or guidance.

Design

Design is an integral part of exhibitions development, and given the subject matter of *Unsilenced*, IWM hoped to work with a designer who had experience conceptualising challenging subjects. Nissan Richards Studios has a large exhibition portfolio and had worked with IWM previously on the *Refugees – Forced to Flee* exhibition, another project that involved carefully considered design. Whilst IWM has established timelines for exhibition development, it was decided to begin the design process earlier than usual for *Unsilenced*. The aim was to allow additional time for the designers become familiar with the content and for IWM to offer any additional support if needed. It also allowed for a more detailed 'concept phase' where multiple ideas could be explored in conjunction with the selected content.

The audience research had highlighted the importance of creating an atmosphere where visitors would feel comfortable engaging with the content. In Margaret Halls book, *On Display: A Design Grammar for Museum Exhibitions* she discusses design idioms, differentiating between ‘*idioms of actions*’ and ‘*idioms of atmosphere*’ and how these idioms are used to engage the audience’s attention, highlighting specific objects, helping to set the pace and rhythm of the exhibition. She goes on to describe how it can “*support the definition of thematic sections or to emphasise the highs and lows of the exhibition narrative.*”

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Hall’s descriptions of idioms captures the approach to the use of design in *Unsilenced*. Thinking specifically about ‘pace’ and ‘rhythm’, it was decided to change the overall layout of the gallery which housed *Unsilenced*. A new entry point helped with both visitor flow and ensuring visitors wouldn’t have to pass back through spaces containing challenging content. The choice of colour scheme was also made with these ideas in mind. From audience feedback relating to our permanent Holocaust galleries, visitors had confirmed they felt more comfortable engaging with challenging content when in lighter, brighter spaces. It was therefore decided to use a colour scheme in *Unsilenced* that progressed from ‘dark to light’. During early design conversations the notions of ‘bringing under-represented stories into the light’ or ‘shining a light on victims and survivors’ had been discussed. With the desire to finish the exhibition by focusing on survival and justice, these ideas fit with the proposed shifting colour scheme.

¹ Margaret Hall: *On Display: A Design Grammar for Museum Exhibitions*, Lund Humphries, London 1987, p. 128

In *Exhibition Design* by Phillip Hughes, he details how “*exhibition graphics are habitually called up to express the intangible dimensions of an exhibition’s topic, to act as ‘contextual’ support, to appear in sympathy with the content of the exhibition*”.² Discussions around 2D graphics focused on the ideas of repeating patterns of behaviour when it comes to the use of conflict related sexual violence and its reoccurrence throughout history. This idea of ‘repeating patterns’ allowed the 2D design to also be used as tool to help highlight important bits of information to visitors, drawing their focus – bringing it to the forefront.

The 2D design was further interpreted by a then student artist – Yi-Ching Wang who created three fabric wall panels that are located at the beginning of each of the main spaces in the exhibition. They further amplify the themes and narratives explored in the content and narrative of each space. The 3D design focused on the use of timber frames and structures throughout the exhibition space. In some spaces they were used to reinforce the narrative and interpretation. They were also used to create moments of privacy around challenging content, a concern that had been raised as part of the audience research.

Content

Given the layout of the existing gallery, it was decided to divide the exhibition into three main areas:

- Structures and Representations

² Phillip Huges: *Exhibition Design*, Laurence King, London 2010, p. 107

- Acts and Manifestations
- Justice and Reconciliation

One of the main exhibition aims was the importance of recognising conflict related sexual violence does not take place in a vacuum. There are underlying societal structures, gender norms/stereotypes and power dynamics that need to be considered. This would be the focus of the first room. A mass display of war time propaganda dating from the First World War to the present day, showcased how men and women are represented in times of war. A Bosnian Serb Army M89 camouflage overall highlights that is often those in uniform or members of armed groups that hold power during conflicts. A selection of material documenting the spread of sexually transmitted diseases during times of war and conflict explore how men and women are held accountable for their actions.

The second room of the exhibition focused on acts and manifestations of conflict related sexual violence. One of the questions posed to participants during the audience research was 'what does the term sexual violence in conflict mean to you?' The overwhelming response was it was about rape, and the rape of women specifically. It was therefore important to broaden visitor understanding of how and why conflict related sexual violence occurs, and who is affected by it. Case studies from across IWM's collection were used to demonstrate how conflict related sexual violence can be state-sanctioned or committed by armed groups on a mass scale to insight fear and terror. How victims and survivors can be forced into sexual slavery, and how it can be used as a method of ethnic cleansing or genocide. Showcases in the centre of the

room held documents and objects highlighting how war and conflict create a power imbalance within society, and it is often the most vulnerable – women and children who are at risk of sexual violence. The final section of this room detailed how conflict related sexual violence can be used as a method of torture and humiliation, how this often takes place in detention settings and this is likely where men will experience conflict related sexual violence.

The final room of the exhibition was dedicated to stories of survival, hope and justice. The interpretation detailed the legal advances made in bringing perpetrators to justice, whilst simultaneously documenting the challenges faced by those seeking it. The case studies highlight how evidence of conflict related sexual violence is gathered, exploring ideas surrounding witness credibility and the desire to prosecute crimes relating to conflict related sexual violence.

Photographs and testimony provided by TRIAL International and Forgotten Children of War Association, document the legal and societal challenges faced by children born of war. The final section of the room discussed the use of protest and activism in raising awareness of conflict related sexual violence and in seeking acknowledgment and restitution.

It was also important to recognise that not all victims and survivors will achieve legal justice or restitution for the crimes perpetrated against them. Large wooden boards showcased the work of four non-governmental organisations: All Survivors Project, Free Yezidi Foundation, Waging Peace and Women for Women International. Documenting the work of these organisations, and many others like them who are dedicated to supporting victims and survivors and their communities. Whether by working with individuals directly to provide medical care and legal aid, or by helping victims and survivors to rebuild a

sense of agency and purpose. These organisations also work within communities helping with reconciliation efforts, or at a national/international level creating policy and procedure focusing on prevention and supporting victims and survivors in the aftermath.

Conclusion

Unsilenced: Sexual Violence in Conflict is the first exhibition dedicated to conflict related sexual violence at IWM. The development process for the exhibition relied on the interconnected aspects of audience research, design and content, which sat within a wider conversation of how to approach a challenging subject in a sensitive way that would encourage audiences to engage. At the time of publication, summative audience research is being compiled to learn more about visitor experience to the exhibition. These findings will be compiled along with visitor numbers and wider feedback in a final report, that will be used to inform future exhibitions at IWM that discuss conflict related sexual violence.