

Rape as a Tactic of War

Sexual violence during and after conflict

Wartime sexual violence is one of history's greatest silences and one of today's most extreme atrocities. In many contexts, sexual violence is not merely the action of rogue soldiers, but a deliberate tactic of warfare. It displaces, terrorizes and destroys individuals, families and entire communities, reaching unthinkable levels of cruelty against women of all ages from infants to grandmothers. It can leave the survivors with emotional trauma and psychological damage, physical injuries, unwanted pregnancies, social stigma and sexually transmitted infections such as HIV. The fear of sexual violence holds communities hostage and prevents women and girls from participating in public life or attending school. The costs and consequences last for generations. And often, mass rape continues after the guns fall silent and peace treaties are signed.

Crimes and impunity

The data available reflect alarming levels of rape during conflict and its aftermath: between 250,000 and 500,000 women and girls were raped in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, more than 60,000 in the civil war in Sierra Leone, between 20,000 and 50,000 in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and at least 200,000 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo since 1996. Though shocking, in most cases these data are serious underestimates of the actual numbers of victims, most of whom never report to authorities.

Rape in conflict, when widespread and systematic, is now recognized as a crime against humanity and a war crime. However, it mostly goes unpunished, perpetuating impunity. Sexual violence is routinely ignored in peace negotiations. After war, it is far more likely that perpetrators will be rewarded as part of disarmament and peace-building agreements than that their victims will receive care, justice or redress. On the contrary, rape survivors are often rejected by their own families and communities.

In many post-conflict countries, gender-based violence tops the list of crimes that the police have to address, even though it is severely under-reported. Even cases brought to the attention of the police are rarely investigated properly, seldom lead to arrests, and hardly ever culminate in convictions.

'It is perhaps more dangerous to be a woman than a soldier in an armed conflict.'

Major General (ret.) Patrick Cammaert,
former UN Division Commander for Eastern DRC (MONUC)

UNIFEM – working for local solutions and global commitment

In June 2008, the United Nations Security Council adopted the landmark Resolution 1820, establishing for the first time that sexual violence during conflict and its consequences pose a threat to international peace and security. UNIFEM is dedicated to supporting Resolution 1820 and related resolutions and agreements on women, peace and security.

UNIFEM is a founding member of UN Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict, an inter-agency network of 13 UN entities that advocates action against sexual violence under the banner *Stop Rape Now*.

UNIFEM's efforts to address conflict-related sexual violence include:

- Undertaking high-impact research and analysis that can generate policy attention. One such review revealed that in a sample of 45 conflicts since 1989, only 10 had peace agreements mentioning sexual violence. Based on these findings, operational guidance for mediators is in development along the following principles: UN-sponsored ceasefires should prohibit sexual violence; monitoring teams should track compliance; perpetrators should be excluded from security services and should not benefit from amnesties; and victims should have access to justice and reparations.
- Helping to identify practical approaches that peacekeeping personnel can use to prevent and respond to sexual violence, such as sending foot patrols to protect women as they collect firewood and water.
- Collaborating with security forces in various countries, such as Rwanda, where UNIFEM partnered with the Rwanda Defense Forces to train several thousand military officers to help prevent and respond to gender-based violence; and supporting the creation of gender desks or specialized police units to handle cases of sexual violence.

- Building the skills of members of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in Colombia, Liberia, Morocco, Sierra Leone and elsewhere, to ensure proper recording of rape survivors' testimonies and their access to witness protection and trauma counselling.
- Empowering women and local communities. Examples include engaging Afghan women in information exchanges about human rights abuses; supporting community policing of violence against women in post-conflict countries, such as Liberia and Haiti; and enabling collaboration between women's groups and national police in Timor Leste.
- Responding to widespread sexual violence during political instability and crises, such as by supporting Commissions of Inquiry in Kenya and the Republic of Guinea.
- Engaging local authorities in developing and adopting special measures against gender-based violence in their responses to disasters and post-disaster plans.
- Involving men in speaking out against sexual violence, including traditional, religious, political and civil society leaders, in Haiti, Rwanda, Uganda and Timor Leste, among other countries.

*'There are no rape cultures,
only cultures of impunity.'*

Margot Wallström, UN Secretary-General's
Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict