

## **Violence against Women in War and Conflict**

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*Rape and sexual violence during conflict are tactics that are often employed and are used to demonstrate victory, terrorise the population, break up families, and, in some instances, change the ethnic make-up of the next generation. Yet, it is a topic that is much understudied and often outrightly ignored.*

### **Understanding the Issue**

Sexual violence against women in war and conflict is one of the great silences and repressed issues of history. Even today, the subject tends to be overlooked and pushed to one side, despite increased attention in recent years. In fact, violence against women during conflict has now reached epidemic proportions and become an intrinsic part of the war process in many conflicts.

Rape and sexual violence during conflict are often intended to demonstrate victory, terrorise the population, break up families, and, in some instances, change the ethnic make-up of the next generation. Sometimes rape is used to deliberately infect women with HIV, to render women from the targeted community incapable of bearing children, or conversely, where ethnicity is inherited through the male line, to force them to bear children. Women are often raped during conflict in order to humiliate their male relatives – their husbands and families. Report after report describes women being raped and tortured in front of their husbands, and even their children.

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## Historical Use of Rape in Conflict

In August 2015, the UN Security Council warned that, in Iraq and Syria, sexual violence is being used as a deliberate tactic, saying these acts are war crimes, with claims that Daesh (Islamic State) in particular has created a 'theology of rape' including sexual slavery. But violence against women of this type is in no way unique.

Each situation is specific and it is important to use an inter-sectional analysis and avoid generalisations. However, UN estimates include:

- In Rwanda, up to 500,000 women raped during the 1994 genocide, in acts known as 'genocidal rape'.
- In Sierra Leone 60,000 women raped during the civil war from 1991-2002.
- In Liberia, 40,000 women raped and mutilated (1989-2003).
- In Bosnia in Europe, 60,000 women raped (1992-1995).
- In Democratic Republic of the Congo, more than 200,000 women raped in a decade of conflict.
- High levels of sexual violence uncovered in hidden conflicts (e.g. the previous struggles in Myanmar, Algeria).

Violated women have in such countries bravely given evidence in rape trials in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and elsewhere, in which they sometimes appeared completely covered in disguise since the rapists would have been in the audience.

## Sexual Slavery

In terms of taking sexual slaves, Daesh is also not unique (although they are unusual in that they cannot be shamed, but rather publicise these acts). There is evidence of sexual slavery in Guatemala, Central America, in the 1980s, and in the recent war in South Sudan. In Chad in October 2015, a rape trial heard evidence from women taken as sexual slaves in the 1980s by the army of the then-dictator, including from women as young as 13 at the time and from others forced to watch the repeated rape of their daughters.

A further example is the Comfort Women in Japan and Korea in the 1940s — the use of women and girls abducted by force and taken to be sexual slaves by Japan in WW2 in attacked countries. Some of the women have now been able to speak out after 70 year and at the very end of their lives, breaking their "long silence to talk about the most painful things possible".

## Lasting Repercussions

Sexual violence tends to continue post-conflict. Men have been conditioned to behave violently, and all studies demonstrate increased gender violence and detrimental effects on family relations. The impacts of violence also persist post-conflict, including ongoing trauma, rejection by families and communities, unwanted pregnancies and children as a result of rape, rejection of these children, the stigmatisation and

ostracisation of traumatised women, the spread of sexually transmitted infections and HIV, suicide and coerced suicide (under pressure from husbands or community members), and the rape of women displaced by war and without male protection, including in refugee camps.

Thus, conflict and extremist fundamentalist aggression, as we are seeing in this region [Middle East], tend to breed further violence and to affect relations in families negatively, so that the tragedy of war gets played out – like so many other injustices — on women’s bodies into the future.

In the UN and Human Rights Watch reports, the searing magnitude of what researchers saw included terrible horrors: wombs punctured with guns, women’s private parts torn apart with glass and knives, pregnant women beaten mercilessly until they miscarried, gang rapes and special rape camps, with women frequently sold on from one man to another. The UN commission concluded: “We saw the scars of brutality so extreme that survival seemed for some a worse fate than death”.

### **Survival and Resilience**

International efforts to combat sexual violence in war include brave work over many years by activists leading to the now-universal acceptance that rape is a war crime, and to various key global instruments, most importantly UN Security Council Resolution 1325, passed 15 years ago (and subsequent Resolutions). These have established the Global Women’s Peace and Security Framework, with an emphasis on the participation of survivors and activists in building solutions. Such global measures are vital and have positive effects, even if only at the level of rhetoric. But they have also been critiqued as paternalistic and top down with little powers of implementation, and never enough funding.

Of course, women are not only victims. They can be central in the fight for peace as combatants (e.g. the courageous women Peshmerga) and as peace builders (e.g. in the award of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize to three women peace-builders from Liberia and Yemen). The UN Commission concluded: “On every continent, in refugee camps, bars, brothels, prisons, women survivors...told us about their struggles to heal from the violence and the enduring psychological pain. It is impossible to capture the magnitude of the anguish that permeated their lives.... And yet we saw something else as well. Time and again, we met women who had survived trauma and found the courage and the will to recommit to life...to rebuild community.”

Certainly the picture of sexual violence during conflict is not monochromatic. Women – and people — can triumph against these terrible atrocities even though the torture and violations experienced constitute some of the most distressing and horrendous crimes against humanity. Women’s resilience and the human spirit can sometimes triumph.

*Article Citation: Hague, G. (2016) Violence against Women in War and Conflict, MERI Policy Brief. vol. 3, no. 1.*