

Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War: Women's Hidden Battle During Conflict

Warning: The following post contains descriptions of sexual violence.

With the horrifying mounting body of evidence emerging about Ukrainian women being raped by Russian forces, we are once again reminded of the brutality of conflict. One article reports that around 25 girls and women aged 14-24 were systematically raped in the basement of one house in Bucha - 9 of them are reportedly pregnant.¹ As warfare rages on and the violence escalates, women's bodies have literally become a battleground.

Rape and other forms of sexual violence during conflict is by no means a new phenomenon, but its escalation as a deliberate, strategic or political tactic is now undeniable. Systematic rape can no longer be dismissed as an inevitable by-product of war, but instead as a defining tactic of modern conflicts. In 2008 following a United Nations (UN) meeting where rape was classified as a weapon of war, Major General Patrick Cammaert summarised the effect of this crisis stating, "It has probably become more dangerous to be a woman than a soldier in an armed conflict". Unfortunately, this statement still rings true 14 years later.

Insert Avon's language/stance on Ukraine situation. NO MORE and Avon have teamed up during Sexual Assault Awareness Month to further explore and raise awareness of this issue.

Rape as a weapon of war

Contrary to some public opinions, sexual violence is not a regionally or culturally isolated practice. It has occurred in every documented war in history.² Violence—specifically, rape—has been used as a tactic of war by both state and non-state actors to advance one group's political, economic, religious, or social position over another.³ Rape committed during war is often "intended to terrorise the population, break up families, destroy communities, and, in some instances, change the ethnic make-up of the next generation."⁴

Sexual violence can be perpetrated against all groups of people: women and men, boys and girls, people deprived of their liberty, displaced people, etc. In fact, conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys—including rape, sexual torture and sexual slavery—is widespread. Men and boys are even less likely to report sexual violence than women for fear of stigmatisation and the enormous taboo around the topic.⁵ As a result, it remains particularly invisible and under-reported with a severe impact on men, their families and the community.

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-61071243>

² Brownmiller, S. (1993) Against our will: Men, women, and rape.

³ Farwell, N. (2004). War rape: New conceptualizations and responses. *Affilia*, 19, 389-403.

⁴ <https://www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/rwanda/supporting-survivors.shtml>

⁵ <https://www.msf.org/sexual-violence>

Conflict-related sexual violence has become almost synonymous with rape, however sexual violence takes a number of different forms in conflict and post-conflict settings. Other common forms of violence include sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, sexual slavery, and forced marriage including of minors, amongst others.⁶ In addition to the scourge of conflict-related sexual violence, research has also found that domestic violence against women increases when conflict breaks out and is actually more prevalent than sexual violence.⁷⁸⁹¹⁰

The magnitude of sexual violence during conflict

Conflict-related sexual violence has been, and to a large extent continues to be, shrouded in silence. However, the dynamics behind it, including its prevalence and horrific toll on individuals and societies, have been progressively better understood over the last two decades. The atrocities during the conflict in the former Yugoslavia and the Rwandan genocide in particular lifted the veil on this topic.

An estimated 60,000 women were raped in the three-year Bosnian conflict¹¹ and up to 250,000 in the hundred-day Rwandan genocide.¹² UN agencies estimate that more than 60,000 women were raped during the civil war in Sierra Leone (1991-2002);¹³ more than 40,000 in Liberia (1989-2003);¹⁴ at least 200,000 in the Democratic Republic of Congo since 1998;¹⁵ and in Somalia sexual violence rose by an alarming 80% during the conflict.¹⁶ Mass rape—including of

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<https://www.svri.org/sites/default/files/attachments/2016-01-14/A%20research%20agenda%20for%20sexual%20violence%20in%20humanitarian%20C%20conflict%20and%20post-conflict%20settings..pdf>

⁷ World Bank, Global Monitoring Report: Promoting Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, (Washington, DC, 2007)

⁸ <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/4/2/e003644>

⁹ Jose V Gallegos and Italo A Gutierrez, "The Effect of Civil Conflict on Domestic Violence: The Case of Peru," working paper, August 3, 2011, available at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1904417>

¹⁰ Lori Heise and Claudia Garcia-Moreno (2002), "Violence by Intimate Partners," in Etienne G. Krug et al, eds., World Report on Violence and Health (Geneva: WHO, 2002), p. 100;

¹¹ <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1359249/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

¹² <https://www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/rwanda/supporting-survivors.shtml>

¹³ UN (2014):

<https://www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/rwanda/assets/pdf/Backgrounder%20Sexual%20Violence%202014.pdf>

¹⁴ UN (2014)

¹⁵ http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/drcongo_44598.html

¹⁶ <https://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-republic-congo/legacy-war-epidemic-sexual-violence-drc>

minors—has also been documented in recent conflicts in Bangladesh¹⁷, Myanmar¹⁸, Colombia¹⁹, Ethiopia²⁰, South Sudan²¹ and many more.

To date, reliable global statistics on the magnitude of sexual violence during conflict does not exist. From the data available, arguably the most reliable cross-national study found that wartime rape was significant in 62% of all major civil wars between 1980-2009.²² However, no statistics provide a complete picture of the problem or its prevalence. Due to shame, fear, stigmatisation and many other obstacles there is mass under-reporting and a significant lack of victims receiving, or even seeking, treatment.²³ The UN estimates that in conflict zones, for every rape that is reported, between 10 and 20 rapes are not.²⁴

The human cost

Whether isolated or systematic, the effects of sexual violence are devastating to individuals and damaging to whole communities. Much of the violence reported is unspeakably brutal and the human cost is severe. The sheer brutality of rape during war is evident in the reports of forced captivity, gang rapes in public or in front of loved ones, genital mutilation, and rape using objects such as glass, gun barrels and machetes.²⁵²⁶

Physical consequences include unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections including HIV and injuries such as fistula, all of which “leave women scarred, disabled, unable to conceive and deemed unsuitable for marriage”.²⁷ The resulting psychological trauma can include distress, shame, isolation and guilt, sleeping and eating disorders, depression, and a number of other behavioural disorders which can lead to self-harm or even suicide. It is not only the victims that experience this – partners, children and other family members also experience the trauma of guilt or shame, particularly if they were witnesses to the crime.²⁸

¹⁷ <https://brill.com/view/book/9789004389380/BP000007.xml>

¹⁸ <https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-022-13038-7>

¹⁹ <https://www.ecchr.eu/en/case/sexual-violence-in-the-colombian-conflict/>

²⁰ <https://www.amnestyusa.org/reports/tigrayan-forces-attacks-on-civilians-in-amhara-towns/>

²¹ https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/A_HRC_49_CRP_4.pdf

²² Dara Kay Cohen, “Explaining Rape during Civil War: Cross-National Evidence (1980–2009)”, *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 107, No. 3, 2013, pp. 461–477

²³ <https://www.msf.org/sexual-violence>

²⁴ <https://www.warchild.org.uk/news/hidden-victims-sexual-violence-war>

²⁵ <http://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/491147>

²⁶ <http://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports/2002/drc/Congo0602.pdf>

²⁷ PLoS Medicine Editors. Rape in war is common, devastating, and too often ignored. *PLoS Med.* 2009;6(1):e21. doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.1000021

²⁸

<https://international-review.icrc.org/sites/default/files/irrc-894-sexual-violence-in-armed-conflict.pdf>

The impact of sexual violence during war is both substantial and long-lasting. The social impact of sexual violence post-conflict cannot be overstated - survivors face stigma that forces them out of their families, isolates them from their communities and leaves them alone with their physical and psychological trauma.²⁹ When victims are ostracised, physical and emotional consequences are compounded by the loss of socio-economic stability and opportunity.³⁰ Furthermore, women are also disproportionately affected compared to men in the breakdown of social order that follows war. Post-conflict levels of rape and domestic violence remain extremely high as demobilised fighters primed to use force return home to transformed gender roles or the frustrations of unemployment.³¹ To give one example, prior to the 1995 Rwandan genocide, the average age for girls to marry was between twenty and twenty-five; whereas in refugee camps during and after the genocide, the average age was a shocking fifteen years old.³²

Conclusion

Quote / messages from Avon and NO MORE – Pam and Natalie

Direct to Ukraine page of Global Directory

Call to Action linked to social media carousels

²⁹ <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/53cfa34e4.pdf>

³⁰

<https://international-review.icrc.org/sites/default/files/irrc-894-sexual-violence-in-armed-conflict.pdf>

³¹

<https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199755929.001.0001/acprof-9780199755929>

³²

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/peace-and-security/facts-and-figures#sthash.vq3NnLEu.dpuf>