

Gender-based Violence in Armed Conflicts

Violence in armed conflict affects women in different ways than men. In response, a gender-based approach to violence occurring in conflict settings has been developed. This newsletter gives insights on definitions, institutional developments and applications of this concept.

1.1 Numbers

Despite difficulty in data collection, estimates illustrate the scope of violence targeted at women in recent conflicts. In Rwanda, for example, half a million women are estimated to have been raped during the genocide in 1994. In Sierra Leone, 50 percent of all women are said to have experienced sexual violence, including rape, torture and sexual slavery. Approximately 40 percent of girls and women were sexually abused in Liberia. In the Bosnia-Herzegovina war in the first half of the 1990s, between 20,000 and 50,000 women were raped.

1.2 Definitions

Definitions of gender-based violence in armed conflict varies. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the term 'gender-based violence' (GBV) refers to violence that targets a person or a group of persons because of gender. For the Committee on the Elimination of Violence against Women "it includes acts that inflict physical, mental or sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion and other deprivations of liberty." For the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the term 'gender-based' allows us to understand violence against women in a new context. It refers to the "unequal power relationship between women and men in society."

Victims of gender-based violence are not only female, even if this corresponds to the common use of the phrase, as women are more vulnerable to this type of violence. Some organizations want to underline that especially women are affected and use the term 'violence against women.' But generally, the terms 'sexual violence,' 'violence against women' and 'gender-based violence' are used interchangeably. In recent years, recognition of male-specific violence has grown, but it has not yet been translated into research and policy.

The overarching construct of gender-based violence applies to different environments. The focus on conflict settings emphasizes that GBV increases in conflict-affected situations, when legal institutions and social structures tend to weaken or disappear. This process often starts before the escalation of violence and continues after combat has ceased. Thus, violence committed against women can increase before the actual start of fighting and continue well after it has ended.

1.3 Institutionalization

Gender-based violence is a longstanding phenomenon, but attention from academia and practitioners only grew in the 1990s. Experts explain this rise with the empowerment of women's and human rights' movements.

The first international human rights instrument that explicitly and exclusively addresses violence against women is the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, adopted in December 1993 by the UN General Assembly. In 1998, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) became the first treaty to recognize rape and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence as a crime against humanity. Since then the ICC and other international tribunals, such as the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and for Rwanda (ICTR), have charged almost half of all persons indicted with rape or sexual assault, either as perpetrators or in their role as superiors.

The first United Nations Security Council Resolution addressing women in armed conflict was passed in October 2000 (UNSCR 1325). Eight years later, in June 2008, the Security Council adopted Resolution 1820, which demanded all actors in armed conflicts stop using violence against women as a tactic of war.

1.4 Impunity

A widely recognized problem is that gender-based violence in armed conflicts remains largely unpunished. With the militarization of a society, sexual abuse becomes a tactic of war perpetrated against those in the whole conflict affected region. Those acts of sexual violence often remain unpublished and the perpetrator unpunished. This problem has been recognized in recent years, and changes are taking place. Crucial steps were the two Security Council Resolutions and the legal recognition of rape as an instrument of war by the ICC.

1.5 Applications

In the field of peacekeeping operations, the GBV approach has gained much attention. One example is the UN peacekeeping department, which has developed standards on how to address situations with gender-based violence. They were applied in Sierra Leone, Liberia, DR Congo and Darfur.

Another focus lies on the situation in refugee and internally displaced people (IDP) camps. Women become victims of sexual violence when they search for commodities outside the camps. This problem has gained public attention through the conflict in Darfur. Media and non-governmental organizations report regularly on the widespread violence targeted at female IDPs.

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1.6 Resources

1.6.1 Intergovernmental Organizations

In-Depth: Our Bodies - Their Battle Ground: Gender-based Violence in Conflict Zones, by the Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN)

IRIN is part of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, but its services are editorially independent and its reports do not necessarily reflect the views of the UN and its agencies. This website provides access to the IRIN in-depth report published in August 2004. It provides comprehensive information and analysis on gender-based violence in conflict zones.

Women and Armed Conflict, by WomanWatch

WomanWatch is the central gateway to information and resources on the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women throughout the UN system. It is a UN project created in March 1997 to provide Internet space for global gender equality issues and to support implementation of the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action. WomanWatch is an Initiative of the Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality (IANWGE). The website provides comprehensive information and links on gender and women's issues. It has a special section on women and armed conflict.

WomenWarPeace.org

This website is a portal created by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) on women, peace and security. It is intended to address the lack of consolidated data on the impact of armed conflict on women and girls as noted by Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000). This portal serves as a centralized hub of information from a wide variety of sources, with links to reports and data from the UN system to information and analysis from experts, academics, NGOs and media sources.

1.6.2 Nongovernmental Organizations

Gender and Conflict, by the International Crisis Group

This page gathers the Crisis Group's work on gender and conflict, including reports with a specific gender emphasis and gender-related recommendations. It also provides links to other relevant resources on the web.

Women and War, by the International Committee of the Red Cross

This ICRC website covers the dangers and suffering confronting women in wartime. It also gives access to the ICRC study "Women facing war," as well as related resource materials and links to other sites concerning women.

Women's Rights, by Human Rights Watch

This website gives information on the occurrence of gender-based violence in specific countries, such as Sudan, Iraq and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and it offers information about Human Rights Watch work on women and armed conflict.

Making Rights a Reality: Violence Against Women in Armed Conflict, by Amnesty International
This link gives access to the AI report on violence against women in armed conflicts that was published in 2005. The report outlines the main provisions of international law, and it specifies the responsibilities of states, armed groups and individuals to protect the rights of women during armed conflict.

1.6.3 Research and Academia

If Not Now, When? Addressing Gender-based Violence in Refugee, Internally Displaced, and Post-Conflict Settings - A Global Overview, by the The Reproductive Health for Refugees Consortium
This report's objective is to provide an account of some of the major issues, programming efforts, and gaps in programming related to the prevention of, and response to, gender-based violence among conflict-affected populations worldwide. The publication is composed of twelve country profiles: three each for Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America.

Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict: Global Overview and Implications for the Security Sector, by the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF)
This report demonstrates the scope and magnitude of sexual violence in armed conflict. It profiles documented conflict-related sexual violence in 50 countries and it explores strategies for security and justice actors to prevent and respond to sexual violence in armed conflict and post-conflict situations. DCAF was founded by the Swiss Government and is one of the leading institutions in the areas of security sector reform (SSR) and security sector governance (SSG).

Gender, Children and Security Program, by the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of the Armed Forces (DCAF), Switzerland
DCAF's Gender, Children and Security Program examines cross-cutting issues in developing policy research and implementation material to include the gender dimension widely into security sector reform / security sector governance - processes and activities. Additional projects include capacity-building against gender-based violence and recommendations for security sector actors in addressing trafficking in human beings. The program comprises projects on Gender and Security Sector Reform (GSSR), Women in an Insecure World, Children and Security and Trafficking in Human Beings.

Women, War, Peace: The Independent Experts' Assessment on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Women and Women's Role in Peace-Building, by United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)

This report provides examples of women in embattled regions who have been able to overcome the odds and contribute to the safety and well-being of their communities. It covers topics such as peace operations, use of media, reconstruction, health, and prevention.

1.6.4 Media

Take action on women's security

This article from the Guardian addresses the problems with implementing the Security Council Resolutions 1325 (2000) and 1820 (2008).

Unrelenting attacks on women in West Sudan provoke an international outcry
This New York Times article focuses on violence against women in the conflict in Darfur and international reactions.

1.6.5 Legal Documents

UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000)

This resolution was the first ever passed by the Security Council that specifically addresses the impact of war on women, and women's contributions to conflict resolution and sustainable peace.

UN Security Council Resolution 1820 (2008)

This resolution demands all sides in armed conflict stop using violence against women as a tactic of war.

Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (A/RES/48/104)

This declaration was adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 1993.

Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court

This link leads to the treaty text of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.