



ISSUE DESCRIPTION



COMMITTEE United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
ISSUE Combating the issue of sexual exploitation of women in war zones
SUBMITTED BY Lili Száva Visnyei, Chair of the UN Women
APPROVED BY Her Excellency Anna Takács, President of the General Assembly

Introduction

Sexual exploitation of women and children has been an ongoing issue that intensifies during periods of conflict. In recent years, conflict after conflict and war after war have emerged across the world. Many conflict-affected areas near army bases often become environments where human exploitation is more likely to occur. Mainly women are the targets and the victims of such acts, since many of them are promised benefits that never truly occur later. This also has been considered as a weapon to fight against other nations by targeting civilians. It has also been stated by different nations that this is nothing more than the spoils of war. However, the lingering scars it has left upon the survivors cause PTSD, depression, anxiety and shame of the crime. In some countries it is already considered a crime, but these remain a wide range of countries with fragile political systems and weak enforcement mechanisms to punish the harmful behavior of soldiers. Despite international humanitarian law prohibiting such acts, enforcement remains inconsistent, allowing perpetrators to act with impunity. This issue description examines sexual exploitation in conflict zones as a systematic violation of human rights, its lasting impact on survivors, and the failure of global accountability mechanisms.

Definition of Key Terms

Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV) - Acts of a sexual nature imposed by force or coercion, such as those caused by fear of violence, duress, detention, psychological oppression or abuse of power, directed against any victim (regardless of gender and age).

Sexual Exploitation - Abuse of power or vulnerability for sexual acts, including trafficking.

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) - Violence rooted in gender inequality.

War Crime / Crime against Humanity - Categories under international law; sexual violence may fall under these depending on the scale and intent.

Weaponization of Sexual Violence - Deliberate use of rape and sexual abuse to terrorize or destabilize communities.

Civilian - People who are not directly involved in war.

Sexual slavery - Where the victim is forced to participate in non-consensual acts, in order to fulfil the factors motivating perpetrators. These victims are stripped of their humanity and seen as nothing more than objects.

International Military Tribunal (IMT) - Also known as the Nuremberg Trials. After the Second World War, German officers suspected of conducting or helping sexual violence were trialed and punished.

General Overview

Throughout the years, this human rights issue has been downplayed due to the unawareness of governments. However, as war became frequent the focus shifted back to it. Although attention and focus have been shifted to these acts by some governments, it was not enough to stop the rise in crimes against women. As conflicts are arising at high levels, acts of violence have significantly increased in recent years. The United Nations has urged all member states to draw their attention toward these zones and provide resources for healthcare institutions.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Wartime sexual violence against women is almost as ancient as humanity. Historians believe the first recorded instance occurred around 2000 BCE, but it is presumed to have happened much earlier. Over an extended period of centuries, it was considered an inevitable effect of war.

Women and children were subjected to, and expected to endure, the conquerors' acts. It had been common to refer to it as the spoils of war and it became normalised by society. However, these acts of sexual exploitation were considered a lack of discipline in soldiers and unfulfilled sexual desires. However, in due course, it was stated that it was more connected to warfare than desires, owing to using against civilians to break the conquered territory's spirit.

This crime went unpunished for centuries until the late 1990s when it was penalised by the United Nations and announced as a war crime. Although, it took more than six years to be seen as a crime and implement it into legislation, many experts still demand actions and acts against the perpetrators.

Unfortunately, to this day there are stories of women having to sell their bodies to grant basic standards of living for themselves or for their families. In many cases, these areas suffer from poverty, famine and oppression which place women in a more vulnerable position. Despite the legal processes against wartime sexual violence it still remains a serious and ongoing issue.

SCOPE AND PREVALENCE OF THE ISSUE

In recent decades, armed conflicts have increased, both as civil wars and international conflicts. These conflicts create conditions where sexual exploitation of women becomes more common. The most conspicuous areas are the African and Middle Eastern regions, since they have experienced conflicts and tensions to the point of war. Recent studies have shown that the intensity and density of tension might lead to new war zones by the following years.

As new war zones appear in other areas, some experts have speculated that the number of violent acts will rapidly increase creating a human rights problem soon. Thus, organizations have called for a fast reaction before the problem grows further. Since such violence occurs in areas under military control, especially in occupied or conquered regions and cross-border zones, new control laws often diminish. Power imbalances, insecurity, and weak law enforcement make the exploitation of women easier thus granting the rise of violence. This contributes to the fact that the exploitation of women in war zones is becoming a pressing and serious matter.



FORMS OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION IN ARMED CONFLICT

The ICRC defines sexual violence as “acts of a sexual nature imposed by force, or coercion, such as that caused by fear of violence, duress, detention, psychological oppression or abuse of power directed against any victim (regardless of gender and age)”. It also stated that the perpetrator creates a situation where the victim cannot honestly consent to the actions done to them. In a modern setting many considered are implemented in regulations such as rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced sterilisation, or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity.

These acts are not solitary, they are used alongside the destruction of property, child recruitment, murders and other felonious acts. Armed forces implement these actions to create fear and undermine social cohesion of the people to assert control more easily over the civilian population. Though these acts leave lasting effects on the victims making it harder to recover from the oppression.

ACTORS INVOLVED

The act of sexual exploitation has a wide range of potential and likely perpetrators in war zones. The actors can be state soldiers, international armed groups or rebel organizations that are fighting or controlling a certain territory. In rare cases, it might include unarmed individuals who seize the opportunities of the poor law enforcement.

Those groups of armed militias are the most inclined to commit such acts in order to gain control over the populations and in some cases reward the soldiers. Although they have the highest likelihood, official military forces have been suspected of the same crime. These were allowed to happen since accountability of actions were absent or poor.

As it has been mentioned above, acts with impunity flourish under weak and collapsing legal systems and social orders. Thus, many judicial institutions are unable or neglectful to handle the cases of women, although the fear of retaliation further aids this act. As a result of this, the complexity of the issue and actors pushes solutions and peace into a distant future, allowing the conflict to persist in the war zone.

VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

Even though wartime sexual violence affects everyone, women and girls are the most defenceless and most impacted during conflicts. Another vulnerable group is refugees and internally displaced people, since they have lost their livelihood, home and security. They have depended on aid provided by the government thus placing them in situations where risks were heightened. The most vulnerable are women who are placed or live in non-occupied territories or near military bases.

Households which are female-headed often struggle to supply the basic necessities during conflicts, thus increasing the risk of exploitation by military officials. Girls and women without a legal guardian, husband or male relative may appear easier targets to the actors. They may face a lack of social protection and community support because of the lack of male relatives. These cultural stigmas and gender inequality further enforces the power of abusers and lessen the women's ability to seek assistance or later pursue justice.

Though adult females are the most represented in the news, young girls are especially at risk. Since forced marriage, sexual slavery and trafficking are quite easily carried out without consequences. It is mostly due to the fact that victims are often rejected by their communities, thus further deepening their vulnerability. As these factors simultaneously contribute to enable actions and conditions in which women are easily exposed to wartime sexual exploitation.

DRIVERS AND ENABLING FACTORS

Numerous determinants permit sexual violence in armed conflict zones. Such areas facilitate the weakening of legal systems, policing and the protection of civilians. This creates conditions where abusive behaviors and actors are enabled due to the lack of consequences they face. As power imbalances rise between armed forces and civilians, the vulnerability and possibility of sexual violence. The areas lacking access to shelter, food and water or where protection is controlled by military forces.

Armed conflicts most often go hand in hand with poverty, displacement, famine and economic collapse. These factors further expose girls and women to the risk of sexual exploitation. Cultural stigma only aids to cases that go astray and unnoticed. As a result, many women do not seek justice and are isolated because of their communities and the fear of retaliation. However, authorities also contribute to these factors by neglecting investigations and law enforcement in war zones. These issues are often treated as secondary when compared to the broader, ongoing crisis. As a result, they receive limited attention and insufficient resources.

Collectively, this undermines effective enforcement of international humanitarian law and international human rights law, allowing sexual exploitation to persist with inadequate accountability.

IMPACT ON INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNITIES

Wartime sexual violence leaves scars on both the individual and the community. Survivors are often alienated from their past community. Many of them are stigmatized for living through such an event and left to handle the consequences of the sexual violence. The inability to prevent such atrocities erodes public trust and weakens the social fabric of survivors' nations.

Survivors' immediate consequences are physical injuries and psychological trauma. Physical damage can range from bruises to long-lasting health problems, these are most often treated by healthcare professionals. Nevertheless, the traumatic experiences are overlooked as a result of limited access to healthcare in war zones.

Social consequences are as damaging as physical scars. Survivors are often stigmatized, rejected and excluded from their communities. Families, especially, may abandon them to avoid exclusion which only increases the victims' isolation and economic hardships. At the communities' level, wartime sexual exploitation damages trust, family ties and the cohesion of society. Such impacts go beyond the direct harm inflicted by perpetrators. Survivors have to overcome many hurdles to achieve post-conflict recovery, reconciliation and long-term stability in their everyday lives.

CHALLENGES IN DOCUMENTATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Although authorities struggle to apprehend perpetrators of sexual exploitation of women in wartime, the lack of accountability makes it almost impossible. Concerns about accountability and investigative processes often discourage victims and witnesses from reporting abuses. This is mostly connected to the fear of rejection by the community or carrying social stigma but sometimes the distrust in authorities fuels it. Victims who speak up or discuss their experiences with someone, may need to endure shame, isolation or punishment by their community.

Furthermore, the legal process and system weakens or becomes dysfunctional during conflicts, causing investigations and prosecutions a great deal tougher. As international courts such as the International Criminal Court try to intervene to avoid crimes from going unpunished. Nevertheless, even the ICC depends on the state's cooperation making their jurisdiction more

limited. In some cases, countries might refuse to collaborate with international organizations, allowing perpetrators to roam freely without facing the consequences of their actions.

Not only is it hard to apprehend criminals of wartime sexual exploitation but the collection of evidence is extremely challenging for authorities. Survivors might be deprived of healthcare and medical attention or legal support due to these factors. Thus, the documentation of photographs and medical reports are ignored or destroyed. These barriers only contribute towards the growth of sexual exploitation in armed conflicts. In addition, the tolerance of these acts grants the culprits to avoid legal prosecutions in the future.

Major Parties Involved

Democratic Republic of Congo: The Democratic Republic of Congo has experienced some of the highest numbers of sexual exploitation in conflict zones. These unlawful acts have been linked to rebel groups as well as elements of national armed forces. Persistent impunity and insufficient institutional response have hindered efforts to address the problem, delaying the country's progress toward peace, security, and long-term stability.

Sudan: The humanitarian crisis in Sudan has dramatically worsened due to armed conflicts between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces. This violence resulted in thousands of deaths, displaced millions of people – adding to those displaced by past conflicts – and exacerbated severe shortages of vital resources, which has added to people's difficulties in obtaining basic needs and services. Abuses, including sexual violence, have also been widely reported.

Russia: Since the conflict broke out between Ukraine and Russia, many Ukrainian women reported sexual violence to humanitarian groups. These acts are linked to Russian armed forces and most often, the crimes are related to sexual violence. Although Russia has not acknowledged the validity of these allegations, reports from multiple victims have led to increased international scrutiny. As a result, concerns have been raised globally regarding the conduct of Russian forces and their adherence to international humanitarian law and related agreements.

Ukraine: Since the beginning of the war, women have reported numerous violations against them. Compared with other conflicts, this war has one of the highest rates of documentation of sexual violence against women. Ukraine offers help and aid for

survivors with the help of nongovernmental organizations or international human agencies.

Timeline of Events

1945-1948 - Nuremberg Trials and Tokyo Trials - the first trials where wartime sexual violence was seen as crimes against humanity and reported sexual violence actors were put on trial.

1949 - Adoption of the Geneva Conventions, establishing civilian protections in armed conflict.

1993 - Establishment of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY).

1994 - International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) recognizes rape as an act of genocide.

1998 - Adoption of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

2000 - UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.

2008 - UN Security Council Resolution 1820 recognising conflict-related sexual violence as a threat to international peace and security.

2009 - UN Security Council Resolution 1888 strengthening mechanisms to address sexual violence in conflict.

Present - Wartime sexual violence continues in multiple conflict zones despite existing legal frameworks.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

For decades, the pressing issue of sexual violations has remained unsolved. Though many attempts were made to slowly rectify the lack of legislation. The first legal protection was provided during the Geneva Conventions in 1949 which provided protection for civilians in conflict zones.

During the 1990s, international criminal tribunals condemned sexual violence under international criminal law. In 1994, The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda rape was

acknowledged as an act of genocide. Subsequently the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia tried sexual violence as crimes against humanity.

Afterwards, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court officially classified sexual violence as war crime and crimes against humanity. The United Nations Security Council thereafter adopted it into two separate resolutions called Resolution 1325 in 2000 and Resolution 1820 in 2008. These resolutions addressed sexual exploitation in war zones. Regardless of these actions and advances, United Nations reports show a lack of accountability in many situations.

Possible Solutions and Approaches

As the density of conflict outbreaks and seriousness increases, states are eager to find solutions to this human rights problem. There have been discussions of providing aid or additional frameworks that have given some hope. Though experts are yet to see a change since many are negligent in implementing these measures within their government's framework.

Some experts desire an uptight approach while others hope that NGOs and humanitarian institutions might implement a change. Nevertheless, after repeated failures the world is in need to find a solution in which potential victims may be safe and protected against such unlawful acts.

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