

Understanding Female Sexual Violence in War-Torn Areas

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Sexual violence is a serious issue that many women face across the globe. Across times, women have been subjected to different sorts of sexual harassment and assault, especially in war-torn and post-war regions. Even during times of peace, women still face dangers due to society. Throughout history, many regions have witnessed genocide and targeted massacres that women have suffered from drastically. Sexual violence has been predominant in all modern conflicts as a tactic to induce fear. Furthermore, militias often use sexual violence as a weapon. Examples of such incidents have been reported in former Yugoslavia, India (Kashmir), Rwanda, Sri Lanka, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Russian Federation (Chechnya), and northern Uganda.

As a result, the international system has established several means in order to prevent sexual violence towards women and hold accountable those who conduct such acts. However, many feminist scholars argue against these systems and accuse them of not being effective.

A case in point is the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), “in early November 2003, the United Nations reported that in new fighting in eastern DRC thousands of women and girls had been tortured and raped” (Jefferson, 2004). The DRC conflict was an intense armed struggle that included militias such as Rwandan soldiers, the Mai-Mai, armed groups of Rwandan Hutu, fighting over land, ethnic identity and resources. As a result, “Tens of thousands of women and girls have been assaulted” where “All parties to the conflict have been implicated” (Jefferson, 2004).

There are many factors that make women more prone to sexual aggression. One factor

that makes women vulnerable in war-torn areas is the entrenched misogyny rooted in social norms. Jefferson's study found out that prior to the conflict, women were treated as "second class citizens" (Jefferson, 2004). It was traditional and completely normal for a woman to abide by her husband's orders and to be treated as a commodity for marriage. It was extremely integrated into society that "Some male household heads "resolve" rape cases involving their daughters or sisters by accepting money...or by arranging to have the perpetrator marry the victim" (Jefferson, 2004). In Sierra Leone on the other hand, a nationwide conflict led to the rape of thousands of women of all ages and ethnic backgrounds by both conflicting sides. Militias objectified women as servants for the army. Women were kidnapped to be used as "wives", increasing the male soldier's morale (Jefferson, 2004). In some instances, women were forced to bear children in order for them to become either a recruited soldier or a servant, depending on the gender of the child (Jefferson, 2004). Cultural and social misogyny also play a role in objectifying women, for example, in Sierra Leone "forced marriage and expectations of free female labor are common practice" (Jefferson, 2004).

In efforts to end gender-based violence towards women, international law has passed several laws to protect women and those who are vulnerable. As a result, "The law of armed conflict (LOAC)" has emerged as an attempt to regulate armed conflict (Gardam, 2018). LOAC has provided protection for refugee women and civilians in war-torn areas (Gardam, 2018). LOAC was based on four Conventions and has provided many statements that support women and protect them. LOAC demanded that women war-prisoners are entitled to sanitary products and allows them to have a female supervisor. In addition, LOAC has "provisions are designed to directly protect women from sexual assault" (Gardam, 2018). Initially, these laws targeted "pregnant women" and "mothers of young children" to benefit from the provisions, especially in matters that involve "early repatriation, priority in medical care, emergency relief, and the provision of food and medical supplies" (Gardam, 2018).

However, there are certain limitations that question the functionality and effectivity of

LOAC. First of all, LOAC only functions in periods of “actual hostilities” (Gardam, 2018). This means that LOAC is not concerned with the well-being of women in regions of post conflict. These limitations have affected “all victims of armed conflict” (Gardam, 2018). Traditionally, in times of conflict, males often face harsh conditions as they are often drafted into the army; “They are most at risk of death, injury, torture, summary execution, and mistreatment generally” (Gardam, 2018). However, in post-conflict scenarios, women face harsher living conditions than men. Generally speaking, women have higher chances of surviving the conflict only to be subjected later on to sexual violence, starvation and other forms of physical and emotional abuse. Thus, there is a lack of developmental, and rehabilitation programs to women who are suffering in post-war regions.

When we look at war-torn regions, we might believe that women have it easier and suffer less than men. However, it is not the case. Women face more difficulties and hardships than men because of entrenched misogyny in our society and the lack of efficient intervention from the international community.

In my opinion, the first step in combating female based violence is through providing physical protection for women. UN forces should construct a safe space for women who are affected by violence either through refugee camps or shelters. In addition, it is essential to establish rehabilitation programs for women who faced violence due to war in order to reconstruct their psychological well-being and regain an important role in society. Also, men and child soldiers who were recruited as soldiers should participate in programs that reform and educate them to be an active member in society. In addition, awareness campaigns must be conducted in order to shed light on the dangers that woman face due to systemic oppression in society. On the other hand, certain IGOs and state-led coalitions should have greater involvement in terms of women’s rights in areas where conflict is prevalent. LOAC’s authority should be

extended to prevent repercussions on women in post-conflict regions. Furthermore, women should be assigned with more active and important roles in terms of implementing programs.

In conclusion, violence towards women stems from the entrenched patriarchal society which objectifies women and causes them to be treated like objects. Likewise, the international community requires further intervention capacity in order to protect women affected by such conflicts. Having rehabilitation programs, and campaign awareness alongside international intervention could be the key to successfully prevent sexual aggression and protect women.

References:

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