

# Gender Based violence in conflict environments through media and communication: a path towards healing?

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the ever-increasing influence that media and communication can have on issues of gender-based violence in times of war. It firstly dissects how the media, whether through state or non-state actors, can contribute in aggravating gender-based violence in conflict and post-conflict environments. On the other hand, the article also posits the productive positive impact that the media like documentaries can have in facilitating healing processes for victims of gender-based violence in conflict zones by tackling how they can also contribute in persisting peace-building processes.

**Keywords:** Gender-Based Violence, Media governance, Post-conflict, Peace Building, Healing processes, Representation. Human rights, Civil Society, Participation.

Gender based violence according to the World Health Organization indicates physical, sexual, emotional or psychological abuse mostly targeting women. Today, almost everywhere in the world, young girls and women are victims of various acts of violence on a daily basis

regardless of the country, their culture, class or whether during conflict or peace. In times of conflict gender-based violence particularly often takes the form of rape, purposeful infection, sexual exploitation or forced impregnation used as a widespread tool of war in ethnic conflicts, to create fear and terrorize populations as seen in several regions including Syria, South Sudan, Rwanda, Bosnia or Uganda.

The importance of addressing GBV during conflict and post conflict situations is becoming more and more recognized by international humanitarians and by the media that have the power of informing public opinion and decision making. There is a formative relationship between media and society that can operate to advocate or to disempower, based on the different mediated representations and images relative to GBV and war that it offers.

What kind of responsibility then, does the media have in shaping the discourse on gender-based violence in conflict and post conflict environments?

In the first place, I will show how media and communication can come to aggravate the issue of gender-based violence in conflict and post conflict zones. In another stance, I will point out how the media on the other hand, can play a positive role towards achieving peacebuilding by raising awareness and providing healing processes for victims of GBV.

First off, the media especially when it comes to news report, can reinforce gender-based violence narratives in conflict and post conflict environments directly and indirectly.

On the one hand, the media can instrumentally deploy and weaponize women's body during war. The media can use the status of women as victims of rape in the context of war into an

instrument to pursue a certain agenda, ideology or ethnic goal. Instrumental narratives of women include women victims portrayed as the nation or as “geographies of ethnicity” (Zarkov, 2020). Media representations of the raped female bodies became linked to specific territories which is a representational strategy used by the media that reinforces gender-based violence since those same logics of perceiving the female body as an ethnic geography is imbedded in the practice of rape within ethnic wars. For instance, rape during the Bosnian War was systemic violence targeted against women and used as a tool of ethnic cleansing.

In the Croatian and the Serbian press for example, women’s bodies become represented in the media as sites where the logics of wartime rape are re-enacted. The issue of rape was used in the 1980s by the Serbian nationalist press to construct a victimized ethnic self and the demonized Albanian other. (Zarkov, 2020)

According to Zarkov “those same strategies are imbedded in the practice of rape within ethnic war” and so instead of breaking them the media perpetuated the same logic or culture of rape that rapists used as a warfare tool. Rape as an instrument of ethnic war territorialized women’s bodies as ethnic region in Yugoslavia which is what the press also did by excluding or including certain victims or by emphasizing certain women’s victimhood. Instead of subverting the logic and ethnicization of both the victim and perpetrator, the media came to reinforce it, to establish an ethnic geography, thus validating the mechanisms of gender-based violence.

Indirectly, the media can also reconsolidate structural violence by weaponizing the mediation of strict gender roles to legitimize acts of violence and thus further normalizing gender-based violence. Structural violence according to Galtung is the less visible type of violence that is embedded within the structures of society that “shows up as unequal power and consequently as

unequal life chances.” (Alexander, 2019, p.29) This structural violence relates to harmful common beliefs embedded in social institutions that relate to dominant discourses that make violence justifiable. Violence thus becomes invisible yet still very harmful socially which is seen through the media’s representation while reporting on GBV in many regions. For instance, in Congo, international news coverage of the atrocities that were done to Congolese women during wartime tend to reduce Congolese women to mere victims of sexual violence which standardizes rape as an unavoidable war experience.

By victimizing abused women, the media gives a rational and excuses for GBV. “The way the media covers GBV contributes to the way society views the problem” since GBV is actually induced by a pervasive sexist ideology that assumes women as inferior to men. (2012, AllAfrica.com).

Similarly, in Sudan’s ongoing civil conflict, as sexual and gender-based crimes like abduction and rape increase, governments and societies weaponize the stereotype of women as victims and helpless individuals in war by the State and some parties to justify war crimes and the continuation of violence. (Chavy, 2019) According to the Holmes, also UK media coverage of Rwanda genocide appear to be done in very simplistic stories where women victims are apolitical, feminized in opposition to stories about hyper masculine killers. (Holmes, 2014) Through this, the media “reinforce and reproduce the existing social order” between men and women, thus aggravating GBV. (Frohlich, 2017)

Recognizing the woman as only a vulnerable victim goes in parallel with rejecting masculine vulnerability. Narratives of survivors that do not fall under this constructed victim femaleness

becomes silenced or marginalized by the media. (Silvestri, 2017). For instance, only a very few NGOs and media reports include men as victims of rape and sexual violence in Rwanda or in the Serbian press where usually men are shown as virile and powerful. (Holmes, 2013 p.234) Readers are left with a copy of gender norms in news reports that legitimize gender-based violence. Consequently, stereotypical gendered power dynamics are reinforced making maleness a valid cause for wartime rape. Men are normatively expected to align with a violent masculinity and thus are not represented otherwise in the media which again normalizes toxic masculinities that are the engine of gender-based violence. In addition, the media focusing victimhood and helplessness of women victim blaming is tremendously elevated aggravating gender-based violence by not tackling the complexity and the root of the problem.

Imagining women during conflict or post conflict only as a sexually abused mass and as a feminized passive victim or a symbol of the nation the way the press shaped our imaginary to do, prevents us from viewing women as political actors who manoeuvre within the micro-hierarchies of power to survive.

Thus, on the other hand, despite being strategically manipulated by certain state actors or even by the Western media in ways that reinforce gender-based violence, the media could play a positive role when it comes to peace building.

The media can improve healing processes for the victims of gender-based violence post conflict or even during conflict by raising awareness. According to Shaw, research showed the

allowances of the media to promote human rights, and thus be a “key partner of the peace-making process worldwide”. (Shaw, 2019, p.3).

Firstly, the media can subvert the typical narratives of SGBV in war. Despite having a scarce minimal number of representations of male victims of rape or sexual mutilation, NGOs have been more aware of recognizing bringing men on board of these representations. The New York Times published an article on male rape which was a tremendous step in shattering stereotypes and challenging “traditional assumptions about SGBV in war and genocide.” (Holmes, 2014 p. 234)

The media can also give women a platform and a space to express themselves which can create a supportive network for women victims and advance agendas for a positive change to happen.

NGOS reporting however, seem to play a crucial part in communicating peacebuilding as it has its roots in human rights campaigning. NGOs such as Human Rights Watch, WomenForWomen or Amnesty International were at the forefront of raising awareness on the roots of the issue of rape in the east of Congo. Their first report *War Within A War* provided real testimonies of women rape survivors tracing the psychological impact of the incidents which opened the way for more complex and inclusive reports to rise addressing the complexity of preventing rape in conflict and shedding light on the responsibility of the international community to help stop such atrocities.

There has also been collaborative efforts between media and NGOS. Media institutions in the UK and USA refer to NGOs by adopting the NGO method of “cataloguing personalized atrocity narrative” (Holmes, 2014, p.240) moving away from their design to only shock a western audience seeking to call governments to bring justice to perpetrators of violence.

While not much attention is paid to post-conflict recovery, the media help document experiences. Testimonies mediated through stories, documentaries or films become important in peace building as “stories of speaking out can actually give abused women hope” (2012, AllAfrica.com) and proof to later be gathered by policy makers. In reconciliation process after the war, persecution cannot occur if no one testifies. Bosnian and Croatian women refused to remain silent and had many testimonies about them published which brought the formation of the International War Tribunal where rapes of women were officially tried. Bosnian conservative women spoke about the atrocities they were subject to which was acknowledged by the UN commission of Experts and used to implement legislations against gender-based atrocities as well. (Zarkov, 2020, p.147)

Radio as a medium here also is considered as a great tool towards healing victims and achieving peace. Given the big scale of illiteracy throughout communities, radio comes in to help women describe to the world what they might struggle to put on paper. For example, Kamanga Zulu is a radio drama promoting public knowledge about Gender Based Violence in Malawi (Fuller, 2010, p.69) The testimonies that could be listened to and the wide exposure to human rights infringements can shape policy making and educate citizens. Consequently, the media can then set a relevant agenda to human rights violations like GBV by triggering meaningful conversations among people. (Shaw, 2019)

And while traditional media consists of a singular routed communication, social media have the potential to respond to atrocities during and post-conflict and towards healing victims of

gendered based violence. They enable a wide range of victims around the world to share their experiences of violence “empowering them to become agents of change within their own communities”. In post-conflict situations, social media can network a web among the victims and has the potential to advance peacebuilding, “support social cohesion, change perceptions and behaviors”. (Baytiyeh, 2019)

To conclude, the power of the media during conflict environments is a double edge sword that could be intentionally manipulated by the State or by certain parties legitimizing gender-based violence for their own political, ethnic motives but can also be a great asset towards peace building facilitating victims’ healing processes and giving women a voice by enabling them to make these gender-based violence incidents a political issue.

Mass media can expose human rights violations, raise awareness and bring those to light for the international community. Peacemaking does not only insinuate stopping violence but it comes also through structural and cultural violence to be exposed and challenged. Yet, once we recognize that GBV stems from normalized problematic gendered roles and from a pervasive sexist ideology that assumes women’s inferiority, we can then start deconstructing its media representation and consider policies and practices.



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