

Violence against women in armed conflicts: pre, during and post

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Abstract

The article will briefly present the problem of violence against women in armed conflict. Violence during war varies in extent and takes distinct forms, sometimes is widespread and yet in other conflicts is quite limited. In conflicts violence takes different forms, sexual slavery, torture in detention, rape, humiliation, discriminations etc. However sexual and gender-based violence in armed conflicts lacks visibility and is not fully understood as it is often labeled as a woman's only issue and normalizing rape and sexual assault contains the risk of permitting sexual violence and legitimizing its use as a weapon of war.

Key words: gender, violence, ethnicity, armed conflicts, human rights, immigrants, refugees

1. Introduction

Over the last three decades we have come to know more about the harms that men, women, boys and girls face during periods of armed conflicts. While these are wide ranging and map onto the spectrum of civil, political, social and economic right violations, there remains a need to generate a more in depth and expanded understanding of the physical violence that women are subjected to. The growing body of data from the wars of the last decade is finally bringing to light “one of history’s great silences”: the sexual violation and torture of civilian women and girls during periods of armed conflict. The facts recount family displacement, the rise of HIV/AIDS in areas of armed conflict, the sexual violence and exploitation, the child soldiers, and the all way which war victimizes children and women (Graca, 2001). The term “conflict-related sexual violence” refers to rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, enforced sterilization, forced marriage and any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity perpetrated against women, men, girls or boys that is directly or indirectly linked to a conflict (United Nation Security Council, 2019).

Rape is the most common act of violence against women in wartime. Frequently reported as social or interpersonal violence, but rape is also an act of political violence because communities reject women who have been raped and strip them of their social standard of living (Turshen, 2000). When rape occurs frequently by an armed organization, it is often said to be a strategy of war. Some cases of conflict-related rape are better understood as a practice. Violence that has not been explicitly adopted as organization policy but is nonetheless tolerated by commanders (Wood, 2018). Evidence of violence against civilian women in present day conflicts has emerged from 1980s to today in locales in Latin America (Argentina, Chile, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Peru etc), in Africa (Angola, Burundi, Rwanda, Sierra Leone ect), in the Middle-East (Iraq, Syria) and in the Asia Pacific region (Afghanistan, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Pakistan etc) (Swaine, 2018). Also, conflict in such places as Bosnia and Herzegovina have highlighted the use of rape as a weapon of war (Hynes, Lopes Cardozo, 2004).

Although overall more men than women continue to die as a result of conflict, women and girls suffer myriad debilitating

consequences of war (Wood, 2009). Women increasingly bear the major burden of armed conflict (Gardam, Chalesworth, 2000). So much so, according to a report of the United Nations Security Council (2019), trends analysis of incidents in 2018 confirms that sexual violence continues as part of the broader strategy of conflict and that women and girls are significantly affected.

It was used to displace communities, expel so-called “undesirable” groups and to seize contested land and other resources. Structural gender inequalities and discrimination are at the heart of the differential impact conflict has on women, men, boys and girls. Preventing sexual violence requires the advancement of substantive gender equality before, during and after conflict, including ensuring women’s full and effective participation in political, economic and social life and ensuring accessible and responsive justice and security institutions.

2. The “uneasy” peace

Violence against women by male partners and sexpartners is a major public health problem, resulting in injuries and other short term and long term health consequences, including mental illness and complications of pregnancy (Ramsay et al., 2002). The cultural dimension of the term “violence against women” encompasses an array of abuses targeted at women and girls (culturally and geographically defined, e.g. dowry deaths/ honor killings/ genital mutilation). Usually before the onset of the conflicts – there is a big amount of structural violence (inequality, differential access to food/medical care, no access in education, lack of any kind of freedom and participation in community life etc). Generally the community gives men the ultimate power over women and there is an unequal balance of power – mechanism for subordination.

So there is an impact on gender relations and gender equality (e.g. higher rates of domestic violence), health problems, psychological disorders, social problems, educational problems. In situations of conflict women’s oppression and abuse further increase their usual subordination (Colombini, 2002). For example, traditional barriers to health care, including the lack of diagnostic equipment and adequate treatment, the

insufficiency of premises for the treatment of survivors; the lack of dedicated venues to seek assistance, poor supplies of essential and specific drugs, together with an inadequacy of health personnel, become even more problematic, and all contribute to poor primary health care (Hawkins, 2012).

While substantial legal consideration has been given to sexual violence occurring during armed conflict, specifically to rape, arguably a concentration on high-profile extraordinary violence has diverted attention from the regular violence that women routinely experience in conflict and post-conflict societies.

3. War and/or civil conflicts and the impact on the survivor

There are evidence that women experience armed conflict in a different way than men. Men and boys are also targets of conflict-related sexual violence, particularly in the context of formal and informal detention settings and as relates to men and boys associated with armed groups (Sivakumaran, 2007). During armed conflicts, whether as combatants or civilians, women are subjected to the usual violence of war, just like men. Just like men they are killed, tortured, dislocated, captured, starved or enslaved (Gokalp Kultu, 2014). As far as women are concerned, the violence is prominently of a sexual nature, but this does not exclude women being affected by armed conflict as well. These effects differ widely across cultures depending upon the role of women in particular societies. The most common and conspicuous long-term sequel of conflict stress is PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). Stress, trauma and their interaction in psychology, physiology and sociology has demonstrated that the impact of trauma encompasses biological, psychological, social and cultural phenomena (Jina, Thomas, 2013). Many times the positive evaluation of the self in the social context, as well as social support, corrects the negative effects of stressful events. Culture plays a key role in how individuals cope with potentially traumatizing experiences by providing the context in which social support and other positive and uplifting events can be experienced (van der Kolk, Mc Farlane, Weisaeth, 1996). The interaction between an individual and his or her environment play a significant role in determining whether the person is

able to cope with the potentially traumatizing experiences that set the stage for the development of PTSD.

Thus, PTSD reflects the socio cultural environment in which it occurs. The power of culture as protector, integrator and security system is evident in studies where the degree of cultural assimilation is a key variable (Brown & Prudo, 1981). The cultural significance of raping 'enemy' women — women of a different race, ethnicity, religion or political affiliation — is prominent in analyses of rape in sectarian conflicts (forced prostitution/ trafficking for sex/ acid throwing/ non partner coerced sex/ rape harassment) (Copelon, 1995:205).

Sexual violence results in multiple consequences for survivors and their families, including unwanted pregnancies that may result from such violence. Mothers of children born of wartime rape bear the burden of being ostracized by their own community. In addition to economic difficulties, they are often stigmatized by members of their family and community. Until very recently this violence was thought as an insignificant form of collateral damage.

4. The way to a new country

The process of migration, even in a relatively smooth transition, is an important and stressful event. The mental resilience of individuals, defined as the ability of people to recover from adversities much stronger and with more mental reserves. It is an active process of endurance, self-recovery and development, in response to crisis and challenge (Rutter, 1985).

Psychological violence is perceived as much more dangerous, because it persists to such an extent, that it eventually influences and affects the possibility of balancing and integrating, even when foreigners settle in the new country. The management of post-traumatic stress and its common consequences (sleep and eating disorders, depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, inability to make decisions, denial, withdrawal, confusion, sense of helplessness, emotional problems, etc.) absolutely act conversely to the ability of adapting to a next state or to the degree of acculturation (adaptation - inclusion) (Sklavou, 2018). Deeply entrenched gender-based violence, such as intimate partner violence,

persists and can increase in displacement and resettlement contexts, primarily affecting women and girls.

Refugees and internally displaced persons have reportedly suffered sexual violence at the hands of state authorities, armed groups, smugglers, traffickers and others who control resources and services in humanitarian contexts (Solangon, Patel, 2012). In such settings, desperate parents sometimes forced their young daughters into early marriage so as to reduce the risk of exploitation by strangers or in order to gain access to resources for the rest of the family.

The examples of women losing property rights and of girls not benefiting from reinsertion or tracing programs illustrate the underlying gender biases that make women vulnerable during conflict and in the aftermath to a loss of assets. Rape exacerbates women's vulnerability because of the many social and cultural issues related to women's «cleanliness» and «good behavior» (Turshen, 2001). These underlying gender biases, which existed in society prior to the conflict and are exacerbated by violent conflict, have important policy implications. With timely and sensitive medical treatment, including, crucially, the option to abort safely, most women can heal from the social, interpersonal violence of rape.

5. Conclusion

The culture and environment should protect civilians in conflicts against the effects of stress and trauma. Also create meaning systems that explain the causes of traumatic events. The importance of deeper investigation and theorization is underscored by the pervasiveness of armed conflict in multiple jurisdictions, with attendant loss of life and physical injuries, institutional and environmental destruction, massive refugee flows, and the tendency of conflict to be persistent, cyclical and intergenerational (Lindsey-Curtet, Holst-Roness, Anderson, 2004). Deeper understanding of intimate partner and domestic violence, and its connection to conflict-related sexual violence, is also central to advancing sustained legal accountability for gender-based violence in a manner that might transform continual impunity for a wide range of gender-based harms (Mason, Lodrick, 2013).

The influx of foreign population in each host country and host society, is an important condition, which is translated in multiple needs, such as highlighting the weakness of national and welfare mechanisms, polarizing inclinations and discomfort, and generally a state of imbalance, which requires multi-focal intervention (Sklavou, 2019). The main fields of working with this population could be summarized (Sklavou, 2018):

- 1) Resolving basic and directly related issues of social inclusion
 - ▶ Legalization procedure, reassurance of a residence permit
 - ▶ Accommodation or hosting in reception centers
 - ▶ Fundraise and essentials
 - ▶ Learning the spoken language
- 2) Guiding and confronting with cultural shock
 - ▶ Dialogue on the process of migration and the selective or non-selective choice of the country of resettlement
 - ▶ Information on the cultural frame of the host country
 - ▶ Guidance on how services are structured and how the state works
 - ▶ Guidance on solving daily, simple issues such as transportation, trading with services etc
- 3) Problem Management and Troubleshooting
 - ▶ Dealing with physical or mental health problems, with an emphasis on anxiety and stress control
 - ▶ Finding a job, temporary or permanent
 - ▶ Participation in education (formal or informal) and in training courses, reeducation, lifelong learning
 - ▶ Networking with services, sectors, foreigners' associations, and generally looking for supportive networks

To sum up, it can be concluded that armed conflicts have the capacity to exacerbate existing inequalities in the society, and the patriarchal gender roles victimize women. Gender based violence is the most extreme manifestation of gender inequality. It violates the right to life, the right to security of person, the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, the right to an adequate standard of living, the right to food, and the right of freedom from torture or cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment. Gender discrimination remains deeply entrenched and widely tolerated in

many areas, affecting women at both community and household levels. These inequalities are often linked to deep-rooted socio-cultural beliefs and practices that attach specific roles, responsibilities, behavior, expectations, opportunities and become stronger during of conflicts.

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