

Sexual violence and armed conflict: United Nations response

*Sexual violence during armed conflict is not a new phenomenon. It has existed for as long as there has been conflict. In her 1975 book *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, Susan Brownmiller presented stark accounts of rape and other sexual atrocities that have been committed during armed conflict throughout history. While historically very few measures have been taken to address sexual violence against women committed during armed conflict, it is not true to say that there has always been complete silence about the issue. Belligerents have often capitalized upon the abuse of their women to garner sympathy and support for their side, and to strengthen their resolve against the enemy. Usually, the apparent concern for these women vanishes when the propaganda value of their suffering diminishes, and they are left without any prospect of redress. It is true to say that the international community has, for a long time, failed to demonstrate a clear desire to do something about the problem of sexual violence during armed conflict. The turning point came in the early 1990s as a result of sexual atrocities committed during the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, and it seems that, finally, the issue has emerged as a serious agenda item of the international community.*

INTRODUCTION

Many of the steps taken to address sexual violence against women during armed conflict have occurred within the framework of the United Nations. This issue of *women 2000* focuses upon some of these developments. Two points must be made at the outset. First, sexual violence during armed conflict affects men as well as women. However, it is clear that women are more likely to be subjected to sexual violence than men. Women are also targeted for different reasons than men, and they are affected by the experience in very different ways than men. For a woman, there is the added risk of pregnancy as a result of rape. In addition, women occupy very different positions in society than men, and are treated differently as a result of what has happened to them. Women are frequently shunned, ostracized and considered unmarriageable. Permanent damage to the reproductive system, which often results from sexual vio-

lence, has different implications for women than for men. Thus, while it is imperative to acknowledge and redress the trauma suffered by both men and women, it is important to recognize their different experiences when responding to the problem. Secondly, it must be emphasized that sexual violence is only one of the issues that arise when considering women's experience of armed conflict. For example, more women than men

become refugees or displaced persons during conflict, and women's primary responsibility for agriculture and water collection in many societies renders them particularly vulnerable to injury from certain types of weapons used in conflict, such as landmines. Further, women's overall position of disadvantage within the community means that the general hardships accompanying armed conflict frequently fall more heavily on women than on men.

Towards the end of 1992, the world was stunned by reports of sexual atrocities committed during the armed conflict in the former Yugoslavia. Newspaper headlines decried: "Serbian 'rape camps': Evil Upon Evil" and "Serben vergewaltigen auf obersten Befehl" (Serbs rape on highest orders).¹ The media reported that rape and other sexual atrocities were a deliberate and systematic part of the Bosnian Serb campaign for victory in the war. A perception was generated that detention camps had been set up specifically for the purpose of raping women, and that the policy of rape had been planned at the highest levels of the Bosnian Serb military structure. Strong and persistent demands for a decisive response to these outrages came from around the globe.

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