

Rape as a Weapon

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There are currently 11 million refugees and over 20 million internally displaced people (IDP) in the world. The majority of these are women and children, most of whom have fled from situations of armed conflict.

There has been increasing acknowledgement over the past decade about the endemic nature of systematic rape and other forms of sexual torture in conflict and post-conflict situations. Women and children are raped to humiliate their husbands and fathers, to degrade communities, and to exhort information or to create fear. The atrocities range from gang rape by groups of soldiers, horrors such as rape by trained dogs and the brutal mutilation of women's genitalia. These atrocities often occur publicly and involve a level of depravity which is difficult to understand. For example, fathers and sons are forced at gun point to sexually violate mothers and daughters. Whole villages of women are raped and have their nipples mutilated with wire cutters. Forced pregnancy is used as a form of cultural genocide.

During flight, women and girls are raped by border officials and security forces who are assured of acting with impunity. However, escape to a refugee camp or settlement does not provide protection for most women and children, as they are often raped by rival groups, police, "peace-keepers" and even by humanitarian aid workers. To quote the head of one camp, "If you can find one woman here who has not been raped [while they are in the camp], I will give you a prize". The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) acknowledges that a majority of all refugee women and many children are routinely raped and sexually abused. This has devastating consequences. Women who have been "shamed" by their public rape in the community are shunned in the camp. Some women and girls are abused by their husbands, or expelled from their families or communities, and left to fend for themselves in situations of extreme danger. Many children are born to refugee women and girls as the result of rape. Many women and girls are forced to trade sex for food for themselves or go hungry and without medicine to feed and care for their children.

Aside from the above, refugee women may also have traumatised children who may have witnessed torture and rape. Some children have experienced it first hand; they may have also seen fathers, brothers, uncles killed, or have them "disappear." Children may have nightmares because they remember bombing and living on the run. Their traumatised mothers have to respond to the needs of the children as well as their own.

It is only very recently that these issues have been placed high on the agenda of UNHCR and other UN agency meetings. This situation has been acknowledged in international law, in the International Criminal Court Statute, which declares that rape in conflict situations is a crime against humanity, a war crime and, in some cases, an act of genocide. It is included in United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820, which address the role of women in conflict and post-conflict situations. UNHCR has developed some excellent guidelines to assist humanitarian workers to address the issue in refugee and post-conflict situations.

Even so, often these issues are hidden in a welter of euphemistic language. The public health system has been one of the few groups to deal with this issue and offer services to women, but this has been done under the banner of “reproductive health.” At the time when these services began, it was the only way that they could breach the silence. Yet, there is so much that is lacking within this approach. The health risks to women and children, both physical and mental, from these experiences are extreme, and yet, at the field level, they are still often hidden behind a wall of silence. There is little access to contraception, or emergency contraceptive and safe abortion services to prevent continuation of unwanted pregnancies. There is exposure to HIV and AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections yet there is often inadequate prevention and management services. Women’s genitalia are often severely damaged but there is no access to specialist health care. Despite the horrendous trauma experienced by many women and girls, there is seldom access to counselling or psychosocial support.

In much of the literature about this issue, forced prostitution, sexual slavery, and women forced into unwanted relationships with men in order to feed their children or to survive are referred to as “engaging in transactional sex” or “exchanging sexual favours.” Rapists are referred to as “boyfriends.” This euphemistic language is effectively decriminalising the acts of torture and serious criminal abuse which these women are suffering.

A conspiracy of silence still exists about the true extent of the problem, and until it is fully acknowledged, women will not receive the services which they deserve. Women who have suffered rape and sexual abuse report keeping this secret from those who should be offering them redress and protection for fear of being labelled prostitutes and being denied refugee status or visas on moral grounds. This is well documented by UNHCR, Amnesty International and many aid agencies working with women refugees. Lack of legal redress for refugee women offers impunity to perpetrators and violate the civil and political rights of the women survivors. The punishments decided by the refugee committee judges are often insufficient for the crime. For example, a man who committed rape in a camp of refugees from Burma was charged with 2,000 baht (US\$56) and three weeks in detention. Women refugees recounted that he stated, “I have 4,000 baht (US\$112) so I can commit rape twice.” Failure to acknowledge the extent of rape and sexual abuse, and the fact that these are forms of torture, human rights abuses and criminal acts belittles the experience of the women concerned and is detrimental to refugee women and their families.

Addressing sexual assault as a family problem and working with both women and their husbands to prevent the occurrence of domestic violence are also crucial to the successful resettlement of many refugee families. Many men are not able to accept that their wives have been raped. A Vietnamese saying, “I will not put my chopsticks in the rice bowl where another man has eaten,” typifies the attitude of many men to their wives who have been sexually abused. Instances of women being abandoned and their husband taking a mistress or another wife have forced many women to stay silent about their experience, even to their closest family members.

Refugee women across the world want the issues addressed. They want acknowledgement that what they have suffered is a crime. They desperately need the increased levels of effective and appropriate services which will come

with this acknowledgement. They need sexual and reproductive health services which are designed to respond to the sexual violence they have endured, and they and their children need effective and appropriate psychosocial support. As a senior official at UNHCR Geneva recently said, “Silence is complicity. We have been silent about this issue for too long”. □□□

—*Third World Network Features*