

Violence against women

In situations of armed conflict and displacement

Armed conflict and uprootedness bring their own distinct forms of violence against women with them. These can include random acts of sexual assault by both enemy and “friendly” forces, or mass rape as a deliberate strategy of genocide.

Some forms of violence resulting from conflict/refugee situations

- Mass rape, military sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced “marriages” and forced pregnancies
- Multiple rapes and gang rape (with multiple perpetrators) and the rape of young girls
- Sexual assault associated with violent physical assault
- Resurgence of female genital mutilation, within the community under attack, as a way to reinforce cultural identity
- Women forced to offer sex for survival, or in exchange for food, shelter, or “protection”

Increased violence against women during conflict

The general breakdown in law and order which occurs during conflict and displacement leads to an increase in all forms of violence. The tensions of conflict, and the frustration, powerlessness and loss of traditional male roles associated with displacement may be manifested in an increased incidence of domestic violence against women. Alcohol abuse may also become more common and exacerbate the situation.

The underlying acceptance of violence against women which exists within many

societies becomes more outwardly acceptable in conflict situations. It can, therefore, be seen as a continuum of the violence that women are subjected to in peacetime. The situation is compounded by the polarization of gender roles which frequently occurs during armed conflict. An image of masculinity is sometimes formed which encourages aggressive and misogynist behaviour. On the other hand, women may be idealized as the bearers of a cultural identity and their bodies perceived as ‘territory’ to be conquered. Troops may also use rape and other forms of violence against women to increase men’s subjugation and humiliation.

Who is most vulnerable?

Some groups of women and girls are particularly vulnerable in conflict and displacement situations. These include targeted ethnic groups, where there is an official or unofficial policy of using rape as a weapon of genocide. Unaccompanied women or children, children in foster care arrangements, and lone female heads of households are all frequent targets. Elderly women and those with physical or mental disabilities are also vulnerable, as are those women who are held in detention and in detention-like situations including concentration camps.

Health consequences

Besides the many physical and psychological consequences of violence against women (see sheet on *Health consequences*), the impact on the “social health” of a community is both negative and widespread. Social bonds may be broken as women isolate themselves or are isolated by their families and communities. A legacy of bitterness towards

the perpetrators may make reconciliation and community reconstruction particularly difficult.

Impact on health systems

In situations of war, the existing health services are usually overstretched and at best functioning at reduced levels. In addition, they are expected to cope with a greatly increased number of injuries because of widespread violence.

Health systems need training support to enable them to deal with such situations. Two useful documents on how to support and help victims of violence in conflict and displacement situations have been produced by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (see below).

Sources:

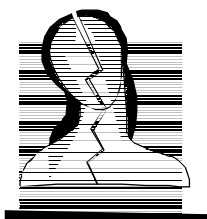
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Violence against women

The girl child

The earliest years of a person's life are supposed to be a time of carefree exploration, growth and support. For millions of girls around the world the reality is quite different. Violence against the girl child includes physical, psychological and sexual abuse, commercial sexual exploitation in pornography and prostitution, and harmful practices such as son preference and female genital mutilation.

Sexual abuse of children

Child sexual abuse is an abuse of power that encompasses many forms of sexual activity between a child or adolescent (most often a girl) and an older person, most often a man or older boy known to the victim. The activity may be physically forced, or accomplished through coercive tactics such as offers of money for school fees or threats of exposure. At times, it may take the form of breach of trust in which an individual, such as a religious leader, teacher or doctor, who has the confidence of the child, uses that trust to secure sexual favours.

Studies have shown that between 36% and 62% of all sexual assault victims are aged 15 or less (see table in *Rape and sexual assault* information sheet). Research suggests that the sexual abuse of children is commonplace.

Incest, sexual abuse occurring within the family, although most often perpetrated by a father, stepfather, grandfather, uncle, brother or other male in a position of family trust, may also come from a female relative. As with sexual abuse, incest is accomplished by physical force or by coercion. Incest takes on the added psychological dimension of betrayal by a family member who is supposed to care for and protect the child.

Research in Kingston, Jamaica, reported that 17% of a random sample of 452 primary school girls, ages 13-14, had experienced attempted or completed rape, half before the age of 12.¹

In a study of 1193 randomly selected ninth grade students in Geneva, Switzerland, 20% of girls and 3% of boys reported experiencing at least one incident of sexual abuse involving physical contact.²

A general unwillingness to acknowledge the extent of child sexual abuse exists in many societies. Attempts to downplay the prevalence and nature of child abuse often blame the victim or the victims' mother for the violence. Accusations against the child include the idea that the child invites the abuse or that she imagines it. The mother may be blamed for "causing" the abuse by refusing to have sex with the abuser, or for "colluding" by not realising or reporting what was going on.

Attention is often focused on commercialized paedophilia, which while important, distracts attention from the more widespread problem of incest and sexual abuse.

Commercial exploitation

The commercial exploitation of children occurs in many settings. The problem includes child prostitution and pornography, the trafficking of children for sexual purposes, and bonded labour.

Many factors can conspire to push children into exploitative and abusive situations. Well documented cases show that families are often deceived by the promise of job

opportunities for their children. Sometimes, girls are sent away from home to work and become subject to physical and sexual abuse.

Street children may be at particular risk. With no means of economic or social support, they may be forced to rely on prostitution for survival. They also lack the basic protection that a home and family can offer, thus making them more vulnerable to violent attack on the street.³

Female genital mutilation (FGM)

Today, the number of girls and women who have been subjected to FGM is estimated at more than 130 million individuals worldwide, and a further two million girls are at risk of this practice.⁴

FGM, a form of violence against the girl child that affects her life as an adult woman, is a traditional cultural practice. In those societies where it is practised, it is believed that FGM is necessary to ensure the self-respect of the girl and her family and increases her marriage opportunities.

FGM constitutes all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs whether for cultural or any other non-therapeutic reasons. FGM is discussed extensively in the WHO document, *Female Genital Mutilation* (see sheet on *Selected readings*).

Son preference

In most societies, a higher value is placed on sons. In extreme cases, the reduced status of daughters may result in violence. Prenatal sex selection can result in a disproportionate number of abortions of female, as compared

with male, fetuses. After birth, in families where the demand for sons is highest, infanticide of female infants may be practised.⁵

Other forms of discrimination

Son preference may manifest in other practices which are discriminatory against girls. These practices include:

- neglect of girls, more so than boys, when they are sick;
- differential feeding of girls and boys;
- a disproportionate burden of housework for girls, from a very young age;
- less access to education for girls than their brothers.⁶

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