

Forum: General Assembly 3: Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee

Issue: Measures to recognise survivors of sexual violence in war zones as legitimate victims of conflict and terrorism and heal them

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Introduction

Sexual violence occurs in nearly all military conflicts and as such has a devastating effect on the population of these war zones. Despite this the survivors of sexual violence in war zones are largely ignored both during and after the conflict. This is the case because the participants in a military conflict are, as a rule, more concerned with winning the conflict, than they are with 'behaving properly'. Therefore we cannot expect that the victims of sexual violence in war zones will be helped by the belligerents, which makes it necessary for the United Nations (UN) to help the survivors of sexual violence in war zones.

Sexual violence harms the most vulnerable members of society, namely women and girls. The war effort draws the healthy male population away from their homes to the front, which leaves their dependants exposed to increased risks of violence. Yet we should not forget that men can be victims of sexual violence as well. Many incidents have been reported in countries such as Serbia, Iran and Chile. A study of 6000-concentration camp inmates in Sarajevo reported that 80 percent of men reported having been raped. The complicated state of events of most modern conflicts, wherein many factions fight each other and form (temporary) coalitions with each other (for example the Syrian civil war), and the use of guerilla tactics only increase this risk. Furthermore sexual violence is sometimes used as a weapon in its own right during conflicts. Systematic rape has been used in for example the Yugoslav Wars to demoralise the enemy. This only further emphasises the need for the United Nations to act and help the victims of sexual violence.

Helping the victims of sexual violence in war zones is not as easy as it may seem. First of all they should be recognised as the victims of terrible crimes and be treated as such, which may prove to be very hard in complicated conflicts. Only after this the United Nations can attempt to 'heal' the survivors of sexual violence.

Definition of Key Terms

Sexual violence

Sexual violence is defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as: “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work.”

War zones

War zones are regions where a military conflict is taking place. The scope of the military conflict can range from all-out war to occasional raids.

Background Information

Sexual violence in military conflicts had been accepted as unavoidable for centuries and it was not until the end of the twentieth century that this started to change. Although sexual violence occurred on a massive scale during World War II, it failed to receive the proper attention then. The Geneva Conventions of 1949 outlawed wartime rape in international conflicts, yet not much was done to actually prevent sexual violence in military conflicts. The Yugoslav Wars changed this, the huge proportions of sexual violence in these wars caused the United Nations Security Council to take a firm stand on this issue. The council declared in 1992 that the: “massive, organized and systematic detention and rape of women, in particular Muslim women, in Bosnia and Herzegovina” is a crime that has to be addressed. This was the start of the efforts of the United Nations to stop sexual violence in war zones. Several International Criminal Tribunals such as the the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (1993) have designated rape as a crime against humanity when committed in military conflict and directed against civilians. Furthermore the United Nations Security Council has adopted numerous resolutions on this issue during the past two decades.

The efforts by the UN to put a stop to sexual violence in war zones have been bundled in the UN Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict. It is an international body within the United Nations which aims to put an end to sexual violence in conflicts by uniting the work of thirteen United Nations entities. Amongst these are for example the World Health Organisation (WHO), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and Department of Political Affairs (DPA). This organisation has

been able to achieve many things since its establishment in 2007. Its foci are gathering data on the scale of sexual violence in conflict, raising awareness and setting up programmes to help the survivors of sexual violence in war zones.

Yet despite all these efforts sexual violence remains a largely hidden crime. Victims hesitate to report their experiences for fear of being ostracised by their communities. This is something that has to be changed if the United Nations are to recognise the victims of sexual violence and help them.

Major Countries and Organisations involved

Basically all countries that have experienced a conflict within their borders have been confronted with sexual violence. Therefore it is pointless to list all these nations as the list would be incredibly long and would not add anything to a debate about this subject.

UN Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict

As has been said before, UN action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict (UN Action), is a UN body that coordinates the efforts of thirteen UN agencies on the topic of sexual violence in war zones. It has three main pillars are: Country Level Action (local programmes), Advocating for Action (raising awareness) and Learning by Doing (research). UN Action may prove essential in any resolution regarding the issue of sexual violence in war zones, because of its expertise and authority on this subject.

Timeline of Events

Date	Event
1949	The fourth Geneva Convention outlaws wartime rape.
1991-2001	The Yugoslav Wars heightened the attention for sexual violence in war zones, which prompted the UN to take action on the issue.
2007	The establishment of UN action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict.
2008	The UN Security Council demands the complete halt to acts of sexual violence against civilians in conflict zones through the adoption of resolution 1820.

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

- Resolution 1325 (october 2000)
- Resolution 1820 (june 2008)
- Resolution 1888 (september 2009)
- Resolution 1889 (october 2009)
- Resolution 1960 (december 2010)
- Resolution 2106 (june 2013)
- Resolution 2122 (october 2013)

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

There have been numerous approaches to counter sexual violence. That is why our objective stands on the point of making those approaches even more efficient. Since sexual violence cannot be prevented by a few governmental strategies, this is an issue that needs to be addressed officially and in nongovernmental contexts, because of its hard to defeat nature. It is unlikely that the perpetration of sexual violence in conflict zones can be completely prevented. The measures taken by the UN to support women in conflict zones are proven to have a long time to be fully initiated and influential in the concerning region. There have been numerous attempts by the UN to support countries in conflict that have displayed efficiency, as well as attempts that have worsened the situation overall (e.g. the deployment of the UN peacekeepers). The governments of various countries have adopted special strategies which directly suit their own countries situation to help the victims of sexual violence, but since most of these methods have not had huge success according to previous UN Security Council documents (ref. S/2015/203), it is necessary to better the current approaches.

Possible Solutions

Before discussing the various possible solutions to this issue, it is crucial to notice that this issue is about recognising the victims of sexual violence and healing them. This means that the main focus of a resolution on this issue should not be prevention. Although, of course, prevention can be included, it is not what this issue is centered on.

A way to, at least partly, solve this issue is by encouraging victims of sexual violence in war zones to come forward and report their experiences. As has been explained, sexual violence in war zones remains a hidden issue. This can be changed by ensuring that the perpetrators of these harrowing crimes are brought to justice.

Victims of sexual violence would be encouraged to report their experiences as well, which is a first step towards revealing this hidden issue. This, however, is easier said than done, but there are strategies the United Nations can implement to ensure that justice will be served. Ensuring that domestic courts and other courts work to address sexual violence in accordance with the international human rights law is essential.

Yet for real changes with regards to this issue, the mentality of people has to be changed. Education is obviously the most effective way to do this. Setting up local education programmes for civilians might in the long term ensure that the survivors of sexual violence in war zones will no longer be ostracised, but recognised as legitimate victims of terrible crimes.

Furthermore the role of safe houses to protect the victims of sexual violence should be considered. As has been stated before the survivors of sexual violence are often excluded from their communities. By setting up safe houses for them the survivors of sexual violence will have a safe place to go to. These safe houses could also serve as places where victims can recover from their traumatic experiences.

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