

Violence, War, Women

Too many women today are still victims of violence and war. The United Nations have given attention appropriately on different occasions not only to the tragedy of domestic violence but has also expressed its commitment to overcoming the suffering endured by women in national and international conflicts; this includes the problem of refugee and internally displaced women who are having to cope not only with their own personal suffering but also with the fatigue and responsibility of taking care in such desperate situations of the children and elder members of the family.

Sadly, when armed conflict emerges at any level, women become the special target of combatants in ways that dehumanize their dignity. The time has come to condemn and sanction vigorously all sexual brutalities perpetrated against women. In this regard, the involvement of women in the management of material help and medical and psychological assistance to the victims of such violence could be of significant importance. . .

My delegation is convinced that the road to ensure swift progress in achieving full respect for women and their identity involves more than simply the condemnation of discrimination and injustices, necessary though this may be. Such respect must first and foremost be achieved through an effective and intelligent campaign for the promotion of women, involving all sectors of the human society. Women should be teachers and builders of peace and should be given this opportunity by means of an adequate preparation.

Dr. Marilyn Martone, Vatican Delegation to the United Nations,
Address to UN Commission on the Status of Women, March 8, 2004

Violence Against Girls and Women in Armed Conflicts

- Between 20,000 and 50,000 women and girls were raped in Bosnia-Herzegovina during the war in the Balkans (1992-1995).
- Between March 1999 and February 2000, the Sierra Leone Chapter of the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) helped and supported more than 2,000 women and girls who had been abducted by armed combatants. More than 1,900 of them had been raped. Most had sexually transmitted diseases, and many were pregnant.
- Scores of both Israeli and Palestinian civilian women and girls have been killed in the conflict in Israel.
- In the course of the armed conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), which began in August 1998, tens of thousands of women and girls (some as young as 8) have been raped and sexually abused; have survived gang rapes.
- While no official estimates have yet been made, accounts of rape by the Janjaweed against women of Darfur, Sudan are in the thousands since the conflict began there in 2003.
- Hundreds of girls were among the thousands of children recruited as soldiers after conflict resumed in Liberia in 1999. Girls were raped and forced to provide sexual services to male soldiers, and girls and women were actively engaged in fighting throughout the country.
- In Nepal, rebel forces have been conscripting women to fight since the 1990's. In Sierra Leone, approximately 30% of the child soldiers in rebel forces were girls.

Problems Faced by Women *After* Armed Conflicts

- Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of soldiers are very important programs in the aftermath of a conflict, but these kind of programs often fail to serve the needs of girls and women who were soldiers or serving soldiers, often by force.
- The return of male relatives, many traumatized and brutalized by conflict, often brings violence directly into the home. Weapons brought back from conflicts can be used to threaten or harm women. Women who are war widows are also vulnerable in many societies.
- In some places where the conflict may be officially over, such as in Afghanistan, women and girls face continuing risk of rape and sexual violence from members of still-armed factions and former combatants.
- Women and girls who are victims of rape in war often become victims of social stigmas and are rejected from their communities because of negative cultural attitudes toward women who have been sexually violated.

International Action Necessary

- Parties to armed conflict, the UN and international bodies must ensure that women have equal participation in the resolution of conflict and in peace processes, as well as in disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programs.
- Parties to armed conflicts, the UN and other international organizations should ensure the effective collection and destruction of surplus and illegal weapons in the context of peace agreements. To do this effectively, women's and other civilian community organizations must be fully involved.
- Civilian and military authorities, and intergovernmental organizations, including the UN, should ensure the needs of women and girls are fully incorporated and addressed in soldier disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programs.
- The UN and all governments should ensure that their forces do not violate women's human rights, through training, enforcing codes of conduct towards women, and prosecuting those who violate these codes.

Women Taking Action

- The Kosovo Women Network is led a multimedia campaign in 2001 to address violence against women, including rape in war and ethnic conflict.
- In April 2003, women in Liberia began a Mass Action for Peace campaign, drawing in women from all faiths and levels of society. A delegation of Liberian women from the Mano River Women Peace Network took part in peace talks and signed the August 2003 peace agreement.
- In Ghana, while parties to the conflict were negotiating a peace agreement in June 2003, Ghanaian women took their Mass Action to Accra, gaining entry to key meetings to contribute their perspective to the peace process.
- Women For Women International (founded by an Iraqi woman) serves women survivors of war and conflict in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, The Congo, Iraq, Kosovo, Nigeria, Rwanda, and Sudan by providing resources and skills to rebuild their lives, families and communities. (www.womenforwomen.org)

Prayer for Women of War

Women of war, living through the unspeakable:
For these we pray, Mary, Our Lady of Sorrows.
Women and girls who have been raped and
brutalized in conflicts:

For these we pray, Our Savior, born of Woman.
Women and girls forced to serve as soldiers:
For these we pray, God of compassion
and forgiveness.

Women who have survived the violence of war,
And who must rebuild their shattered lives
and their families:
For these we pray, O Holy Family.

Women of peace, who work courageously
throughout the world
To end violence, stop conflicts, and
heal broken souls and bodies:
For these we pray,
O Prince of Peace,
O Mother of Mercy. Amen.

