

Violence against women as a weapon



Kvinna till Kvinna

Violence against women claims many human lives around the world. The problem is particularly great in wars and armed conflicts, and is a serious threat to development and peace.

The stereotypical notions of gender position women as those who need to be protected in wartime. Rape has therefore become part of warfare with the purpose of humiliating the 'enemy', and it is not uncommon for men to be forced to watch while their wives and daughters are raped. Warring parties use the rape of women and children as a strategic weapon.

Rape always has enormous consequences – both physical and psychological. In war, women are subjected to consummate torture: weapons are used to cause great pain and damage to their genitals, which can result in them being unable to give birth. Rape is also used systematically as a means of ethnic cleansing.

Men are raped in conflicts too, but women are the ones most exposed to the sexual violence.

Collective shame

Mass rapes in war were first brought to light during the Balkan wars in the 1990s, when reports of systematic assaults on women shocked the world. Strong condemnation of what happened in the Balkans, and later in Rwanda, led to sexual violence being considered a crime under international law. Today, we know that rapes occur in all wars and conflicts. Information from the ongoing conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo indicates that one million women and girls have been raped.

It's not uncommon for women to be cast out from their families due to the collective shame of sexual assault. This shame also makes it difficult to gather facts and statistics, since women cannot or do not want to report these crimes. In addition, not all women are aware of their rights, and do not know that what they have been subjected to is classified as a crime.



The Liberian people were subjected to gross violence by the warring parties. Photo: The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation/Mari Lindgren

Gender-related violence is on the rise in armed conflicts and tends to be more accepted in conflict zones. Sexual violence is used consciously as a war strategy.

"In war, it has become more dangerous for a woman to fetch water than to be a soldier", says Margot Wallström, UN's Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, 2010–2012.





The frozen conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabach is hitting the local population hard: poverty has risen and many are living as refugees. Photo: The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation

1998

The year Mayor Jean-Paul Akayesu was sentenced to life-time imprisonment for his crimes in Rwanda. He was the first to be convicted of sexual violence as genocide.



What is sexual violence?

According to international law, sexual violence is not just rape. It includes sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization and attempted rape.

Few are brought to justice

In the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court sexual violence in war is defined as a war crime, a crime against humanity, and in some cases, as genocide. Despite this, sexual violence against women remains a cheap weapon that in practice seldom has legal consequences or leads to punishment for those responsible.

Many of the UN's resolutions concerning violence towards women are being applied more frequently. In 2011, for example, 150 members of the DR Congo's national army and police force were found guilty of rape.

In the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s, it is estimated that around 20 000 rapes occurred. This has led to 30 prosecutions.

Life imprisonment for crimes in Rwanda

The first to be convicted of sexual violence as a form of genocide was Mayor Jean-Paul Akayesu. In 1998, he was sentenced to life imprisonment for his crimes against humanity in Rwanda. The basis for the judgement was the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide from 1948.

In 2008, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1820 as a response to the massive international criticism surrounding widespread sexual violence in the DR Congo and Darfur in Sudan. For the first time, the Security Council admitted that systematic rape can constitute a threat to international peace and security.

The following year, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1888 mandating the appointment of a Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict.

Men's violence on the rise

In war, violence among the civilian population also rises. Men forced to witness their mothers, daughters or wives being subjected to sexual violence tend to use violence against their family members themselves. This is a way of regaining control and handling the shame.

Unemployment, the trauma and changed gender roles in the family due to the war are other reasons why violence against women increases during and after conflicts.

Human trafficking also increases in conflict zones. Although the presence of the international community in conflict zones ought to protect women against sexual assault, it instead tends to increase the demand for sex in exchange for money or food.

The threat of sexual violence

Men's violence against women is the most widespread threat to women's security, but very little is done by governments and the international community to stop it. Many women live under the constant threat of violence, which affects their daily lives and mental health. Still, violence against women is not yet acknowledged as an issue related to peace and security. The threat of sexual violence also means that many women refrain from agitating for their rights. Activists in conflict zones identify the threat of sexual violence as one of their biggest problems.

Women's organisations in conflict zones prioritise working against gender-related violence. They operate helplines and shelters, educate women about their rights and run campaigns to challenge traditional gender roles.