

SEXUAL ASSAULT IN CONFLICT ZONE: FORENSIC AND HUMANITARIAN CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Committing sexual assault is a serious violation of human rights that is frequently used in war to scare and confuse people. This crime brings many problems for both the forensics field and humanitarian efforts. The difficulties of reaching survivors, few qualified people, poor living conditions and trouble finding proof—mainly in out of the way places—slow down forensic investigations. Because of these limitations, people who break the law seldom face punishment. Besides other issues, victims must deal with gossip, threats of punishment and difficulties finding necessary medical and legal services in emergencies. Cultural issues, along with thin budgets and a lack of security, often block the work of humanitarians. It is necessary to have a strategy that centers on survivors' needs, involves the law, foreign expertise and provides direct help, to offer survivors who were abused during war justice and long-term recovery.

Keywords: Conflict-Related Sexual Violence, Forensic Challenges, Humanitarian Response, Impunity and Justice

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INTRODUCTION

Sexual assault in areas of conflict is a major and under-punished crime today and it is often deliberately used to dominate, force ethnic cleansing and weaken communities. Sexual violence is still used as a form of terror, as shown by the widespread rapes during the 1994 Rwandan genocide and the continue serious problems in the DRC, described by the UN as “the rape capital of the world.” Besides leading to great injuries and trauma for their victims, these crimes disrupt friendships and strengthen the cycles of disruptions. Despite the fact that international organizations help with justice, humanitarian challenges and forensic issues still get in the way. Because of ongoing conflicts, there is little to no means to collect and safely save case-related evidence and support in many regions. Sometimes people who have been abused cannot tell authorities, as they may be isolated by shame, afraid of facing the abuser or because their culture suggests it is taboo. UN Women

reported in 2021 that fewer than 2% of sexual abuse cases in crisis situations are prosecuted which is really concerning for the world community.

The humanitarian side of things makes the situation even worse. Many survivors struggle with inadequate medical treatment, professional mental care and legal assistance and most humanitarian organizations are too busy handling crisis basics. In addition, interference from the political system, obscure rules for conducting investigations and ongoing instability often prevent the successful documentation and prosecution of crimes [1]. Sexual assault has regularly been used by armies to achieve their goals. It is defined as rape directed by government orders, with the aim of achieving military, political or economic success. Hundreds of thousands (estimates are 200,000 to 400,000) Bangladeshi women were deliberately raped during the 1971 war at the hands of Pakistani forces throughout the subcontinent. In recent years, the island

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of Sri Lanka has faced the consequences of 26 years of violence by the LTTE and the nation's security forces.

Serious criminal allegations made against the government occurred between 2002 and 2011 by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). The OHCHR study points out that sexual violence is often a part of conflict situations. The scale and regularity of sexual violence have convinced some people that this is simply one more terrible thing that happens during war. Due to ongoing prejudice affecting many women, the process of providing justice for victims of SGBV is particularly hard. As a result, women and girls are more at risk in societies marked by previous conflict [2].

Saga of the Comfort Women

World War II ended 70 years ago. Many troubling legends, painful experiences and deep scars often remain in people's souls even years after wars have ended. The treatment of the "comfort women" is a hotly debated issue now. In 1932, the Japanese military began making comfort stations where women were forced into sexual slavery by soldiers. The bulk of the women-slaves in Korea were Korean, who were taken from the vast Japanese empire. The idea behind comfort stations was to limit the rise in rapes committed by Japanese soldiers in their colonies. At first, women signed up voluntarily, but later, slavery and abuse became common in the same system. Sometimes women were convinced by false promises for employment to go away from their homes. People often compare the ordeal of comfort women to what Holocaust victims went through. The diaries written by these women describe an awful story of brutal treatment. A respected Japanese scholar introduced the topic by saying the facilities turned into large centers for rape and torture. Coziness Women almost always were at risk of starvation since they rarely had enough food. Following the fighting, the documents were destroyed and the Japanese army who withdrew killed many of these women. People who survived the experience report that their lives have always been full of misery and solitude [2].

The scale of sexual assault in conflict areas: difficulties for forensic and humanitarian investigations

Reporting sexual violence in war areas remains rare and it causes great harm to victims and the communities they belong to. During armed fights, CRSV, as this phenomenon is often called, refers to sexual mutilation, forced prostitution, rape and sexual slavery committed by governments and non-government forces [3].

Impact and Prevalence

The number of cases of sexual violence in crisis parts of the world is truly astonishing. Since numerous cases are not reported, the UN reports that during 2022, over 50,000 cases of sexual violence occurred during conflicts. Apart from violating international law, these activities are also part of war strategies to scare people, harm the community's order and sap its morale. Besides the physical, people who survive sexual abuse often feel their lives are shaped in other ways too. It contributes to problems with the economy, causes people to be socially cut off and leaves them with long-lasting psychological pain. Many children exposed to sexual violence are stigmatized and excluded from receiving both care and education, leading to continuing marginalization and poverty [4].

Forensic challenges

It is difficult to properly look into sexual abuse in places affected by conflict. Because of cultural beliefs, mistrust in those with power or fear of what might happen, most survivors do not report. Since only a small number of incidents is reported, evidence for prosecution is scarce. Forensic teams regularly deal with the pressure of missing resources, destroyed evidence and inaccessible conflict regions. Because investigators do not have the right equipment or proper training, they can't conduct extensive investigations. These problems become further difficulty when enemy forces attack hospitals and force doctors and nurses to quit. Building up forensic expertise has been a central goal of both UN actions and those of non-governmental organizations. Still, many of these efforts fail to attract the needed support from governments and money, making them less effective [5].

Humanitarian Difficulties

Meeting the needs of victims of sexual assault in conflict zones is difficult for humanitarians. Very often, individuals encounter obstacles in getting support for legal matters, emotional problems and medical treatment. People who survive disasters are seldom given the support they need to move forward. Trouble from governments, supply challenges and shaky situations make it tough for humanitarian aid agencies to help. Because of the stigma around sexual abuse, survivors commonly feel isolated and have a hard time receiving assistance and joining their communities again. Governments, communities and international organizations must join efforts to solve these problems. The main reason for these initiatives is to stop future violence, help people take responsibility and give survivors full care [6].

CASE STUDIES

During conflicts, sexual assault helps to intimidate,

bring down a society and weaken community bonds. Warfare comes in different shapes all over the world and often spans borders and conflicts. A variety of in-depth case studies demonstrate the seriousness of sexual assault in conflict areas and they were developed in Rwanda, Bosnia, the DRC, Syria and Ukraine [7].

The Rwandan massacres in 1994

Between 250,000 and 500,000 women were raped in 100 days during the Rwandan genocide in 1994. Most of these crimes were carried out by the Rwandan military, the president's personal guards and a neighborhood militia. To kill Tutsi men and purge Tutsi people from Rwanda, soldiers often raped Tutsi women. A big step forward in international law occurred when the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) found that mass rape is an act of genocidal rape [7].

During the years 1992 to 1995, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Throughout the 1990s Bosnian War, groups perpetrated violence on ethnic minorities as part of their strategy to eradicate groups. Between 10,000 and 50,000 women are believed to have been raped, most often by Bosnian Serb soldiers. Those responsible arranged for "rape camps" to exist where they mercilessly raped, tortured and common enslaved women. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) considered these actions crimes against humanity [8].

Congo's Democratic Republic of the Congo

Rates of sexual violence in North and South Kivu provinces in eastern DRC are among the world's highest. Documented sexual crimes by armed groups include cases of nine-year-old children being raped, by forces involved in the warfare and the M23 rebels. During a single week, health centers reported 572 cases of sexual violence, 170 of where children were involved. Frequently, when resources are abundant, these crimes are used by the government to career people and scare the population [9].

The civil war began in Syria (since 2011).

During the war in Syria, people from many groups such as the government and ISIS have used sexual violence frequently. Suspicious parties have committed rape and assault against women and girls who live in combat areas, are kept in detention centers and are searched in their homes. While trying to destroy the Yazidi community, ISIS has made headlines for raping and enslaving women and girls and many of these victims were only six years old [10, 11].

Since 2022, Ukraine

Reports say that Russian troops have committed sexual abuse in areas they have captured during the war with Ukraine. According to the UN Human Rights

Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, between 2022 and 2024, 376 cases of sexual violence linked to the conflict affected 262 men, 102 women, 10 girls and 2 boys. Most of the cases describe men who had been tortured while imprisoned. Many survivors are afraid of what will happen to them if they report which makes finding justice difficult [12, 13].

RECENT INCIDENTS

Tigray Region, Ethiopia, in the years 2020–2022

Sexual abuse has occurred widely in the Tigray area of Ethiopia ever since the conflict started in November 2020. It appears from numerous facts that rapes along with other sexual crimes were methods of warfare carried out by the aggressor. Although a peace deal was made in November 2022, records from medical authorities indicate that 128 women and girls were victims of sexual assault after that date. Victims identified most of their attackers as affiliated with groups from the military. In addition, most attacks included groups of people working together. An 8-year-old girl was the youngest person hurt by the hurricane [14]. Community-based research from 2023 found that among 500 survivors, 82.2% were raped and 68.4% told researchers they were part of gang rape. Many people who suffered in wars did not get after-violence healthcare or psychological help and the greatest impact was on girls and women ages 15 to 24 [15].

War in Ukraine—started in 2022

Reports of sexual abuse by Russian soldiers have been made frequent since the military invaded Ukraine in February 2022. By the end of 2024, Ukrainian prosecutors had opened 335 CRSV cases, most of which involved women or girls. As a result of underreporting, many think that the real figure is actually greater. Casework on all 88 cases led to trial for 40 of the offenders, though 90% of these trials occurred in the absence of the defendants. The October 2024 report by The Guardian told of Ukrainian men and boys suffering from sexual torture, including electric shocks to their genitalia, in Russian detention camps. According to the UN, this type of threat belongs to a larger group of sexual abuse during conflicts [16, 17].

The Rohingya Crisis is taking place in Myanmar

From August 2017, when Myanmar's military started oppressing the Rohingya Muslim community in Rakhine State, the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar reached a much higher point. Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and other groups report that sexual violence was widespread at the time. Many women and girls faced sexual slavery, gang rape and different types of sexual abuse. Even though circumstances have evolved, the harvest of abuse remains felt by survivors and their areas [18, 19].

STATISTICS & FACTS ON SEXUAL ASSAULT IN CONFLICT ZONES

According to the World Health Organization, every fifth woman in conflict zones has suffered sexual abuse. Only one tenth of survivors who experienced conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) have come forward, as the problem is still widely underreported and they often avoid sharing due to shame, fear and not having easy access to resources. Even though 3,293 cases of sexual violence related to conflict were confirmed by the UN in 18 countries in 2022, it is thought that the number was far larger (UN Security Council, 2023) [20].

Many articles report that boys and toddlers younger than 8 are involved more frequently, but girls in the age group 15 to 24 are the principal victims. A study done within affected communities found that: Nearly all of those who survived sexual violence—82.2%—had also been raped. Around two-thirds of people (68.4%) were victims of gang rape. Just 40% of rape survivors managed to receive any psychological or medical help after their experience [21].

Ethiopia (Tigray)

After the 2022 peace deal, there were at least 128 reported cases of rape and many rapes were linked to members of the military and additional perpetrators (Physicians for Human Rights, 2023) [22]. Out of the 5,171 women in the study, 489 said they had gone through sexual violence during the war [23].

Ukraine's situation from 2022 up to the present

By November 2024, the United Nations was reporting 376 confirmed cases of CRSV, with 262 men, 102 women, 10 girls and 2 boys being those who had suffered (UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission, 2024) [24]. So far, 335 investigations have been opened by Ukrainian prosecutors, but most of the trials did not lead to convictions and were held without the defendants present. (HRW, 2024) [25].

Rohingya crisis (Myanmar)

The military's actions in 2017. About half (52%) of Rohingya women interviewed in Bangladesh said they had been sexually abused. Both Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have found that such practices as sexual torture and gang rape happen frequently [26].

Experiences after the War

More than 9 in 10 survivors have to deal with suicidal thoughts, despair and PTSD years after the event. Because sexual violence causes many maternal deaths, the spread of STIs and results in forced relocation, it is treated as both a public emergency and a war crime. Many children whose parents were victims of rape in conflict zones are still subjected to discrimination, being stateless or abandonment.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN CONFLICT

Often, conflict-related sexual violence happens because armed groups use it to work toward their political, military or ideological interests. You need to know what leads to these crimes to create effective ways of preventing and dealing with them.

Threatening Societies

Often, sexual assault is intended to upset communities, lower people's trust in those in charge and create fear. During the Bosnian War (1992–1995), rapes were used to scare Muslims and cause them to flee. It's more expensive to buy a bullet than it is to commit rape. Since January 2012, the role of the United Nations Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict was created.

The End of Social Organizations

Honor stands for a woman's value in many traditional communities because of the importance placed on family and community status. Through struggling too, as there may be more opportunities for exploitation. Many survivors of the genocide said sexual abuse was used to kill Tutsi people and disgrace entire clans.

Sending huge populations to death camps and removing whole ethnic groups

Part of genocide is using sexual abuse to make women pregnant, infect them with sexually transmitted diseases or prevent them from having children. The reason for these actions is to alter the mix of ethnicities among the next generations. Rohingya women were gang raped by the military, made to stand naked and often insulted with racial slurs (HRW, 2017). On this point, the ICTY in Bosnia deemed that rape camps and forced impregnation were considered part of ethnic cleansing.

Abuse and mental tactics

Psychological torture is often achieved by using sexual violence against someone under control. To increase humiliation, inmates are raped this way both by guards and by other inmates, in front of their families or fellow prisoners. Sexual assaults on the genitalia and electrocution are reported cases among Ukrainian detainees in Russia, clear instances that Russian forces use to distress and manipulate traumatized civilians (The Guardian, 2024) [27].

Establishing Compliance with Patriarchy

Conflict in patriarchal cultures is likely to make gender discrimination even worse. CRSV may be used by combatants to show appreciation for their soldiers or regain power. While trying to protect the country, South Sudanese commanders are said to make soldiers take on "wives" who are commonly girls or women, something that amounts to sexual enslavement (UNMISS, 2022) [28].

People struggling with these two traits

Regular ways of checking accountability do not work in times of chaos. Therefore, men in uniform can take part in opportunistic sexual violence without feeling any pressure. In the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, over 70% of rapes by armed groups were not reported in a 2020 survey because people believe impunity is the cause of escalating violence (MSF, 2020) [29].

Showing the adversary how much we outclass them

The main way CRSV abuses boys and men is by undermining masculinity and causing them chronic harm. Many people believe that even though they are not widespread such actions are heavily stigmatized and intentionally used to weaken male togetherness and identity on the other side. Many male detainees in Libya (2011) and in Syria to this day have been sexually assaulted with objects by military officers (UN OHCHR Reports, 2019–2023) [30].

FORENSIC POLICING WITH SEXUAL VIOLENCE LINKED TO CONFLICT

Investigating sexual abuse in areas of war is vital to be just, hold the guilty accountable and support survivors. However, there are several problems holding up these operations such as faulty legal documents, medical papers and safety problems.

Security Concerns and Access Limitations

Problems related to security and who is allowed to use information. During times of conflict, the instability in a region often prevents investigators, forensic experts and humanitarians from reaching survivors quickly and safely. Because conflict-affected zones are usually managed by hostile government soldiers or armed groups, it is often dangerous for experts to access crime scenes. International organizations were not allowed to visit key places in Tigray, Ethiopia which kept human rights observers away and made it difficult for investigators to collect strong and reliable evidence (Physicians for Human Rights, 2023) [31].

Displaced Survivors and Destroyed Infrastructure

During violence, forensic labs, police stations and health centers are often either damaged or left empty, making it impossible to preserve evidence of sexual abuse. Since many survivors are likely to be in hiding within the short time frame for gathering forensic evidence, it can be tough to reach them. Rohingya survivors in Bangladeshi refugee camps wanted to report sexual assaults, but they could not get appropriate kits, privacy or technical support (UNFPA, 2018) [32].

MEDICAL AND LEGAL RECORDS

Local Professionals Lack Proper Training and Equipment

Survivors of sexual assault are often seen by medical staff who do not have the needed training and tools to collect evidence properly. According to research,

about 90% of workers in health services in both the DRC and South Sudan did not know their country's proper reporting processes which led to missing evidence or problems with documents (MSF, 2020) [33].

The Value of Documentation Standards and Forensic Nursing

Forensic nurses are prepared so that their knowledge can bridge the differing needs of medical care and reporting. They follow the same guidelines that countries around the world have agreed on. The United Nations Manual on the Effective Investigation and Documentation of Torture, alternatively known as the Istanbul Protocol. WHO's guidelines for managing medical care after rape. In areas affected by conflict, forensic nursing remains a rare profession and those who do exist are sometimes poorly funded and don't work in emergency environments. Failure to properly document sexual violence incidents in a timely and correct way means the case is unlikely to be successful in court [34].

Difficulties in Preserving Evidence and Protecting Witnesses.

People who have survived violence usually avoid talking or meeting with investigators because they may be abused again in revenge, looked down on or re-traumatized. War areas often lack proper places to store forensic samples, so evidence may be lost, contaminated or tampered with. If paperwork is not done properly or if untrained people mishandle evidence, it often results in violations of chain-of-custody rules, making evidence unreliable in foreign tribunals [35].

Humanitarian Challenges in Addressing Conflict-Related Sexual Violence

People who experience sexual violence in conflict regions often suffer a lot from social, psychological and physical wounds. It is important for humanitarian actions to include helping victims rejoin their communities, provide continued care and ensure legal action after the crisis. But, in most instances where conflict has taken place, true survivor-centered approach faces serious difficulties.

SURVIVOR NEEDS

Access to Safe Abortion, STI Prevention, and Emergency Medical Care

Alongside getting emergency contraception, those affected by CRSV must also see a doctor immediately for HIV disease prevention, treatment of other STIs and treatment for injuries. Abortion should always be safe, but it is often prevented by strict laws or a shortage of help in conflict zones [36, 37]

Wider Psychosocial Aid and Return Home

Many survivors face ongoing emotional problems and need to receive assistance on an ongoing basis. When they are socially excluded, it is very hard for rape-

affected children to reintegrate. Trauma recovery and caring for one's self-esteem benefit from psychosocial support [38, 39].

Barriers to Service Delivery

The existence of cultural silence, fear of what might happen and stigma. If a survivor's abuser belongs to the military or militia, they are likely to remain silent because they feel uncomfortable, targeted by society or worried about their abuser's threat [40, 41]. Because sexual violence is a deep secret in many societies, victims often do not report it and are ostracized. Difficulty for humanitarian groups to help people in conflict zones. Agencies working in humanitarian relief often have trouble helping people when the area is troubled by conflict or political chaos [42]. As well as natural obstacles, lack of proper infrastructure and actions taken by armed groups cause access problems in some areas.

There Are Not Many Ways to Seek Legal Justice

The legal systems in many war-torn nations are too weak or lacking which permits widespread impunity [43, 44]. Many survivors struggle to get justice because they do not have access to lawyers, they are afraid of being punished and they face social criticism [45-47].

Methods for Transitional Justice

In societies after conflicts, truth commissions and tribunals mainly ignore CRSV. There is a shortage of approaches that focus on gender and the needs of survivors and what survivors need often goes unheard.

CONCLUSION

Sexual assault in war zones is a serious type of violation rarely reported under international humanitarian law. Propaganda is usually used to discourage people, weaken the sense of community and assert power over others in war. Although CRSV is globally considered a significant crime, barriers to

both forensic documentation and humanitarian assistance still exist. The difficulty of getting to crime scenes, the lack of tangible evidence and scarce expertise for forensics all stop investigators from effectively pursuing CRSV cases. Owing to their experiences of fear, trauma or shame, many survivors do not want to come forward or take part in the legal process, hindering the development of good arguments. For this reason, justice and deterrence are weakened, as most crimes go unpunished.

Problems such as inadequate medical care, missing mental help and old cultural guilt are just some of the difficulties survivors face. During ongoing armed conflicts, there is often little or no availability for emergency care, safe abortion or therapy. Meanwhile, a lack of enough funds, access and effective communication between groups makes survivors' lives more difficult and delays their recovery. A plan that focuses on survivors and includes support for law enforcement as well as for humanitarian work should be used to solve these difficulties. It involves improving both legal and health services, making it easier for help to reach war areas, giving local first responders more knowledge and amplifying survivors' voices in organizations seeking peace. Justice and forgiveness will continue to be difficult as long as there is so much impunity and silence about sexual crimes in war.

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