

The Ethiopian War; Gendered and Sexualised Violence



“In your worst nightmares, you cannot imagine what has happened to the women in Ethiopia.”

- UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed

Introduction

Wars and conflicts have been cited as the origin of most gendered and sexualised violence. Therefore, wartime sexual assaults have received a lot of attention from scholars who have attempted to theorise the main reasons for their occurrence, how they happen and also their intended victims. Upon several facts-finding and situational analyses, it emerged that wartime rape does not happen by chance; it is a well-calculated and targeted policy because there has always been a correlation between sexual and gendered violence and the state's responses to sexual violence, to which many feminists have concluded as an integral part of wars and conflicts, and not just a concurrent event.

I direct my attention to the Ethiopia Tigrayan war which started in November of 2020. Irrespective of claims of sexual abuse by soldiers, which has resulted in overburdening health centres with the demands of rape victims for urgent medical attention, beds, contraceptives, and sexually transmitted infection aids (STIs) tests, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government and the military were not immediately responsive to interrogations from Reuters on the issue. On the contrary, they laid the blame at the doorsteps of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) forces, the region's former ruling party. Meanwhile, the media was muzzled, communication lines were disconnected for weeks, and it was even a tussle for humanitarian agencies to access the rape victims. Provoked and overwhelmed, Pramila

Patten, United Nations (UN) Special Representative of the Secretary-General on sexual violence in conflict (SGSVC), clamoured: “I call on all parties involved in the hostilities in the Tigray region to commit to a zero-tolerance policy for crimes of sexual violence.”

Rape theorists, having analysed the recurrence of sexual assaults during war and conflicts, resolved on two propositions: the “sexism approach”; where women are targeted as the main object of rape and the “genocide approach”; whereby the ethnicity or race of women becomes the motivation for sexual attacks. That notwithstanding, scholars have not been able to arrive at a definite conclusion on exactly how sexual violence became a weapon of war, and whether the act itself is preceded by any form of romance or it is simply sexual violence.

Lyn Ossome, a feminist political theorist, in the context of Kenya’s transition to democracy, lamented that regardless of the ever-increasing publications and highly legislated forms of gendered violence, sexual violence has not seen any decline. She observed that studies of wartime rape highlight three important points of comparison: first, “the gendered corporeality of political violence”; second,

“the contested notion of the instrumentalisation of sexual violence as a weapon of war” and third, “the role of the state as a mediator of violence.”

Professor Shireen Hassim, a scholar of gender studies and an internationally renowned expert in feminist theory, also wonders why women’s high level of access to state bureaucracies and legislatures, particularly in developing countries, has not been able to guarantee the much-anticipated equality, fairness, and justice. Feminist scholarship is therefore overwhelmed with shock at the neutrality of the state in questions of gender inequality.

Recognising that “rape has become a weapon of war”, the Rwandan and Yugoslav Tribunals felt it was a dehumanising situation that required legal attention, and therefore, prosecuted rape cases as genocide and a crime against humanity.

The onslaught

November 4, 2020, will never be forgotten in the history of the Tigray people of Ethiopia. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s full-scale attack on the region with its approximately 7 million inhabitants, following accusations that the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), had attacked a federal military base. The blame game then began; whereas the TPLF complained of being ostracised from the federal political process, the Prime Minister accused the former of disrupting his outlined campaign and political promises.

Abiy’s government postponed the August 2020 scheduled general elections because of the coronavirus pandemic and extended its term. This, the TPLF regarded as unconstitutional and proceeded with the Tigray’s state council elections in September of the same year regardless of the former’s disagreement and the federal government’s objections. As a result, they challenged each other’s legitimacy in the process and eventually, the federal government reduced budgetary allocation and support to the Tigray region.

With support from the Eritrean Defence Force (EDF), the Amhara Regional Police Special Force (ASF), and Fano, an Amhara militia group, the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) attacked Tigray, dehumanising and exposing the Tigrayan to all forms of torture and death threats. Among them were beatings, rape, gang rape, sexual slavery, and sexual mutilation of the women and girls, mostly amid mumbles suspected to be ethnic references.

The December 2021 Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) report of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) revealed

that a total number of 4.2 million people have suffered internal displacement in Ethiopia. A related report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) published in February 2022, shows a record of 51,000 refugees in East Sudan.

Snippets of the Tigrayan War

According to the Office of the UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Pramila Patten, among the many heartrending and dehumanising sexual brutalities reported are stories of inter and intra-familial sex for essential supplies.

The sexual ordeals aside, many women and girls have witnessed the rape, different levels of torment and murders of relatives and friends. Some women were deliberately subjected to hunger and starvation while babies and toddlers were maltreated. In addition, women, girls, and even young children were held hostage for days, weeks and sometimes months in a situation that is tantamount to sexual slavery.

- *“Two survivors had large nails, gravel, and other types of metal and plastic shrapnel inserted into their vaginas, causing lasting and possibly irreparable “damage.” (Amnesty International)*
- *“One of them raped me in the courtyard and the other raped my mother inside the house,” said a 14-year-old schoolgirl. “My mother is very sick now; she is very depressed and desperate. We don't speak about what happened; it is impossible.” (Aljazeera)*
- *“Since late December, we've treated 254 women who are survivors of rape. Of those women, 175 had fallen pregnant from their rapes. We were able to terminate all those pregnancies. One of the women, who was already pregnant when she was raped, was left incontinent from her injuries. The*

youngest rape victim was four years old, the oldest was 89. (The Observers, France 24)

- *Semira was hit three times just below her left ear for refusing to tell them why it had taken her so long to answer the door. She has no recollection of what happened next, but Armesa was there and saw everything. He saw what no 15-year-old boy ever should – three men raping his mother for hours, inflicting injuries so severe, she would lie bedbound and broken for weeks. (iNews).*
- *When she (a 28-year-old woman) arrived at the hospital, she was incredibly weak. The gynaecologist who carried out the operation successfully removed two nails, several pieces of tissue, a balled-up plastic bag and rock from her vaginal cavity. (The Observers, France 24)*
- *Lelay, a 20-year-old woman from Baaker, told Amnesty International she was attacked in her home in November 2020 by armed men who spoke Amharic and wore a mixture of military uniforms and civilian clothing. (Amnesty International)*
- *She said: “Three men came into the room where I was. It was evening and already dark... I did not scream; they gestured to me not to make any noise, or they would kill me. They raped me one after the other... I was four months pregnant; I don't know if they realised, I was pregnant. I don't know if they realised I was a person.” (Amnesty International)*
- *Nigist, a 35-year-old mother-of-two from Humera said she and four other women were raped by Eritrean soldiers in Sheraro on 21 November 2020. (Amnesty International)*
- *She said: “Three of them raped me in front of my child. There was an eight-months pregnant lady with us, they raped her too... They gathered like a hyena that saw*

something to eat... They raped the women and slaughtered the men.” (Amnesty International)

- *Tseday, 17, told Amnesty International that she was abducted by eight Eritrean soldiers in Zebangedena and held captive for two weeks. She said: “They took me to a rural area, in a field. There were many soldiers; I was raped by eight of them... Usually, they went out to guard the area in two shifts. When four of them went out, the rest stayed and raped me.” (Amnesty International)*
- *Blen, a 21-year-old from Bademe, said she was abducted by Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers on 5 November 2020, and held for 40 days alongside an estimated 30 other women. She said: “They raped us and starved us. They were too many who raped us in rounds. We were around 30 women they took... All of us were raped.” (Amnesty International)*
- *A 40-year-old woman was repeatedly gang-raped by a group of 15 Eritrean soldiers and left on the side of a road. (Global Voices)*
- *A 34-year-old woman was raped by four Amhara forces and had a hot metal rod inserted into her genitals to burn her uterus. (Global Voices)*
- *A 65-year-old woman was forced to watch as her two daughters were gang-raped and beaten in front of her. (Global Voices)*
- *“After they raped me, I was unconscious,” said a 22-year-old woman who asked to be called Hagosa, which is not her real name. “I wasn’t able to walk or speak for a while.” (VOA News)*

- *“There is a lot of suicide happening, especially those that are giving birth and having great difficulty integrating back into their communities. There have been babies found dead in the bushes, because women are struggling to breastfeed them, and they have no access to bottles or support because nothing is running properly. They have just left them.” (iNews)*

Structural Sexualised Violence

Inger Skjelsbæk made references to women in general as victims in the war zone and said they are labelled “essentialist” but when there is an integration of ethnicity, religion, and political affiliation with wartime rape, where “new patterns of power and dominance occur” she dubbed it “structuralist” to demonstrate that several other factors, beyond the known gender-based reasons, also constitute wartime rape:

Ethnicity-based sexual violence

Sexual violence was prevalent and calculated towards terrorising and humiliating the victims and their ethnic group. The ruthlessness of some of the attacks on Tigrayans was intentional. A 19-year-old rape victim remarked: *“sexual violence against Tigrayans is an effort “to damage us, this is aimed at destroying us, there is no other explanation. In all respects, they have divided us. From now on being an Ethiopian means nothing to me.”*

Another rape victim expressed *“I am only Tigrayan now, not Ethiopian, if we were Ethiopian the government wouldn’t let us be raped by soldiers.”*

Some survivors have described the attacks as a weapon of “ethnic cleansing” because the attackers made statements such as “we came to cleanse the bloodline” and “if you claim to be Tigrayan, we will come and rape you again.” Not only does this destroy the victims’ culture but also shatters family ties and leaves victims in psychological shambles and breaks the

^{FU} backbone of their culture and religion. Eritrean soldiers slighted a woman by referring to her as a “filthy Agame”, the name of a ‘community of proud and hard-working people in eastern Tigray.’

Soldiers went round and visited individual homes of women and threatened them and asked for the males of the house; their husbands, fathers, and or brothers and forcefully claimed that their absence meant these men were rebels and fighters of the Tigrayan forces who were at odds with the Ethiopian government. Subsequently, women and girls whose male family members were Tigrayan fighters were targeted by the EDF, and wives of ENDF soldiers were also targeted by Tigrayan forces.

Tigrayan rebels rape women from the Amhara region

In August and September of 2021, the Tigray People's Liberation Front took control of parts of the neighbouring Amhara region. The Tigray region fighters of northern Ethiopia subjected the loyal troops of the Ethiopian federal government to extensive rape and sexual violence.

Confirming this act, Amnesty International reported that 70 women in Nafis Mewcha, in the Amhara region reported that they were raped by TPLF fighters over nine days in August at the time when their town was under siege by the TPLF armed militia. Not only did the Tigrayan rebels rape them, but Amnesty International reported that several women were robbed and beaten in the course of the attack.

Most of these women could not access medical care because the NGO offering medical assistance had left the area due to imminent security threats. It did not end there, soldiers and other armed militiamen persisted in threats, intimidation and insults with disparaging ethnic comments including “Amhara the donkey” and “greedy Amhara” others were “This is what you deserve” and “You are disgusting”. When Amnesty

International called them regarding the inhumanities, they declined.

The Glooms of Wartime Rape

- Joe Lauria referred to the rape of approximately 500 women in the mineral-rich eastern Democratic Republic of Congo not only by rebels (mainly local and Rwandan Hutu rebels) but 10 per cent of them being by government soldiers who sometimes also take part in the illicit mineral trade. The military has mostly engaged in systematic rape during civil wars “to strip women of their economic and political assets.” Meredith Turshen referred to this idea of sexual assaults during civil wars as a “political economy of rape where assets are transferred from the weak to the strong, and the winning faction gets to control large assets.”
- Lauria records 103 rapes in Luvungi village in the North Kivu province (DRC) which were believed to be in connection with creating the opportunity to seize an important mineral concession in proximity. This led Lauria to conclude that “rape in war and conflict is a cheap, effective, and silent weapon and is used exactly to terrorize and put fear in a whole society.”
- Jeffrey Burds' study on patterns of wartime sexual violence in Europe during the Second World War uncovered a “complex psychology” of wartime rape and the dominant paradigms within which it is understood is interestingly complicated. His exposé revealed that rape and other forms of sexual violence were not regarded as crimes in German military law. On the contrary, the bone of contention is rather “race-mixing” and not the actual crime of rape: rape as a singular case did not engineer punishment. For The German Reich judiciary, especially in the Eastern provinces, “race defilement” is equated with “high treason” which is regarded as a serious offence.

- According to Hillman, sexual violence is so central to U.S. military law that it has altered the internal parameters of military legal culture. He further suggests that “prosecuting soldiers who rape in civilian rather than military courts could help break the link between war, military service, and sexual violence, and treating soldiers who rape just like civilians who rape would allow military criminal law to focus on peculiarly military crimes”.

The Aftermath of Sexualised Violence

Post-sexual violence effect is not only devastating but also traumatising as rape victims are usually plagued with serious physiological and psychological strain.

❖ Physiological Trauma

Constant bleeding, backache, waist pain, immobility and fistula were the commonest complaints among victims. Women who have endured repeated rapes become weak and have restricted movements. Some also tested positive for HIV and other Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) “These acts could potentially be construed as crimes against humanity”, said Agnes Callamard, Amnesty International Secretary-General.

❖ Psychological trauma

Issues of mental health were very common among many women. After enduring these kinds of sexual violence, survivors are left to their fate; they are compelled to live with horrific flashbacks of rape, war, and death for the rest of their lives. “Sometimes I dream about it. Maybe it's because I stress over it, but I feel the attackers are still here”, remarked a distraught female victim.

- **Unwanted pregnancies and social shame**

The demoralising results of rape and gang rape

are overwhelming, and victims are perpetually inundated with serious health issues. A healthcare provider remarked: “There are women having a lifetime injury. Some are pregnant... and they couldn’t get an abortion, others are HIV positive.” Human Rights Watch in their recent reports have expressed their worries about survivors of sexual violence who are in search of basic healthcare. Because of stigmatisation, most women refuse to visit health centres; they only do so on the

grounds of pregnancy. Some health providers, though, have been able to assist in terminating some of these pregnancies.

In December of 2021, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) reported that 11,000 women were pregnant and stood a high risk of maternal mortality and morbidity due to insufficient or inadequate access to maternal health care in the region.

❖ Post-war victimisation of victims

Because of the embarrassments and negative labels attached to these victims, it is increasingly difficult to access these women and provide them with the necessary therapy. In addition, because of the cultural sensitivity of these people, many women hide their plight for fear of being rejected. An instance is when a woman was raped in the presence of her young child. This act is considered sacrilegious therefore, she was rejected by her husband, family, community, and society at large. Women are usually isolated from families and communities and labelled “sexual collaborators”. This and other unfortunate situations have rendered rehabilitation an almost impossible venture.

❖ Blocked access to the country

The Ethiopian government denied the Tigrayans access to banking, telecommunications, and electricity services.

The government also made sure the people of Tigray did not receive any form of aid. This comprised food, medical supplies, and fuel among others. Between the latter part of June 2021 and the latter part of March 2022, overwhelmed with the deprivation of humanitarian assistance they required, survivors of sexual violence and the care providers were left to their fate. These survivors, instead of being cared for and given the utmost attention, were denied access to essential medical and psychosocial care and were also subjected to chronic hunger.

❖ **Outcomes**

In February this year, following the complaints of the Tigrayan civilians, a group of lawyers advocating for the Tigrayan civilians presented an evidence-based petition to the African Commission on Human and People’s Rights on the fact that various levels of abuse have taken place in different parts of Ethiopia and by different factions in which Tigrayan civilians represented “the overwhelming majority of victims”.

Though the actual numbers and the pervasiveness of gender-based violence are not known because the cases are seriously underreported because of fear, stigma, and inability to access health or support centres; the estimated numbers and real casualties are shockingly devastating.

Audrey Occansey

Published by:



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