

## 19 June. International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict

### **The instrumentalization of women's sexuality during armed conflict**

War has traditionally been associated with sexual violence, but the narrative has not always been the same. While this violence used to be attributed to a male biological instinct or even collateral damage, today sexual violence on the battlefield can be understood not only as a flagrant violation of human rights but also as a security issue. As Cynthia Cockburn (2013) reminds us, wartime rape does not constitute "senseless violence", but has underlying motives that can be analyzed and understood. While it is true that, at times it occurs in a context of pure opportunism; it may also be tolerated or encouraged from high military command for strategic purposes as part of ethnic cleansing.

The UN defines conflict-related sexual violence as comprising "rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, enforced sterilization, forced marriage, and any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity perpetrated against women, men, girls or boys that is directly or indirectly linked to a conflict". Sexual

crimes are crimes that fall under the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court as indicated in the Rome Statute (1998).

However, it is not only the magnitude of the atrocities that is disturbing about this phenomenon, but its invisibility. The stigma of having been a victim of sexual violence has not been overcome in many countries around the world, which is why these attacks are rarely reported. According to experts, for every rape reported in connection with a conflict, there are between 10 and 20 cases that go undocumented.

Already at the beginning of the millennium, the UN committed itself to address these issues in its resolutions 1820 (2008) and 1888 (2009). Sexual violence in conflict, an issue with a woman's face, is avoidable and sometimes the responsibility not only of the combatants but of the leaders themselves. Bosnia and Rwanda were clear examples of this, and it was from then on, that the matter gained relevance for the international community.

In the concentration camps during World War II, victims of the Holocaust were already being sexually abused, among other practices, which were recorded in their stories as one of the many barbarities perpetrated by the Nazis.

Going back to the 1970s, violence during the occupation by pro-Soviet militias in Afghanistan set a precedent by instrumentalizing women's bodies to carry out military strategy and suppress the insurgency. Wartime rape created immediate social disintegration and intimidation of entire villages. It generated great humiliation in women that led them to be rejected by their families or even drove them to suicide. The civil war continued to perpetuate rape for multiple purposes such as destroying and intimidating societies, attacking certain ethnic groups, or punishing women and girls for immoral behavior.

In Rwanda, the Hutu population, the hegemonic ethnic group, tried to exterminate the Tutsis. The atrocities committed during the Rwandan genocide were largely gender-biased, as Hutu soldiers used rape as a genocidal strategy against Tutsis as a whole. Acts of gender-based violence, most notably rape, have been part of many modern genocides, but it was not until this conflict that the international community officially considered rape a genocidal act after the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) prosecuted Jean Paul

Akayesu. The ICTR and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) jointly defined how to legally classify acts of sexual violence in times of genocide, setting a precedent and highlighting the relationship between the two phenomena. The relevance of this trial was consolidated with the subsequent establishment of the ICTY, which tried war criminals from the Yugoslav wars, in particular the Bosnian genocide.



*Photo: Dado Ruvic/Reuters*

During the Bosnian War (1992-1995), journalist Roy Gutman reported on his visit to a concentration camp in northwestern Bosnia in 1992. The term "rape camps" emerged to describe these camps where women were routinely held as prisoners and raped. Reports of rape camps in Bosnia differed from those of previous conflicts, as they were considered systematic and targeted acts of ethnic cleansing, which led to international recognition of sexual violence as a weapon of war. Fact-finding missions by organizations such as the European

Community estimated that tens of thousands of women had been raped.

Already in 2014, the UN denounced terrorist groups and armed groups operating in countries such as Mali, Nigeria, Iraq, Somalia, and Syria employing sexual violence as an additional tactic to generate terror among those individuals who differed in terms of ethnicity, religion, or political position. The Islamic State and Boko Haram perpetrated sexual attacks in 2014 to weaken communities and impose their ideological extremism. It was part of their agendas to use women as sex slaves forced to give birth to soldiers in order to demoralize the opponent and to execute ethnic cleansing.

Last March 2022, the United Nations Security Council put the spotlight on several situations of particular concern. In Afghanistan, several incidents of conflict-related sexual violence were verified, especially in areas controlled by the Taliban after they took power in 2021. In the Central African Republic, 700 cases were reported after tensions over the presidential and legislative elections culminated in the attack in Bangui (January 2021), which led to a spike in sexual violence on all sides. In Colombia, although a peace agreement had already been reached between the FARC and the Government the activities of certain armed groups increased in several regions during the lockdowns and, consequently, cases of conflict-related sexual

violence against women and girls. In 2021, the National Unit for Victims recorded around 260. These are only three of the countries on which the Security Council has pronounced itself. The Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, and Yemen are also hotspots of conflict that have set off alarm bells in this regard in the international community.



*Photo: Bulent Kilic/AFP/Getty Images*

Although the possible solutions to this complex and paradigmatic scenario are diverse, women should not be protected from a benevolent sexism, as if the sexual violence they receive was an indirect attack on male virility. The solution is to make them agents of change, giving them a real say and sanctioning those behaviors that violate their physical and moral integrity in the context of such conflicts. It is important to take them into account not only during the development of the conflict, but also in the subsequent implementation of peace. As former Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian

Affairs Jan Egeland stated in 2009, if sexual violence is not addressed squarely in ceasefires and peace processes, there will be no peace for women.

Ultimately, the sexual integrity of women has been one of the crucial points of security around the world. In fact, women, to the extent that they have not traditionally been part of the combat corps (or have done so secondarily), have been configured as an object and not as a subject. Women's bodies have become objects of attack to achieve civilian intimidation or ethnic cleansing. The violation of women's rights, in addition to being a social phenomenon, becomes an instrument to impose political agendas of the aggressors. In fact, the

sexual integrity of women is not only understood as a right, but in some cultures, it is conceived as the honor of the family and the guarantor of social stability. That is why sexual violence and attacks against women are not only an attack on their bodies, but also a synonym of insecurity that aims to undermine social relations and demoralize entire communities. When their bodies are affected, the stability and interests of families, villages and even entire communities are also jeopardized.

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