

Forum: UNWOMEN

Issue: Discussing the impact of armed forces on gender-based violence & exploitation of women with a focus on sexual assault & sexual servitude

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Introduction

The start of the 20th century marked the beginning of an increase in armed conflicts around the world and, with that, a rise in gender-based violence and exploitation caused by the presence of armed forces. While gender-based violence and exploitation are prevalent issues which can affect anyone, women and girls are disproportionately affected by them. The United Nations Refugee Agency estimates that one in three women will experience sexual or physical violence in their lifetime, and living conflict-torn states have made them continuously vulnerable to this.

Sexual violence against women and girls is often used as a weapon of war and a conflict strategy by government officials, non-state militants, and, at times, peacekeeping bodies. It is often difficult to attain justice for victims of these crimes as several Member States have not implemented effective legal frameworks to protect women and/or allow impunity for perpetrators

The implications that this gender-based violence in the context of armed conflicts have had on women have become progressively recognized by key governing bodies, international and national lawmakers, and justice mechanisms over the past decades. This has allowed for the heightened awareness of the issue and what needs to be done in order to prevent it. Various United Nations Security Council Resolutions, committees, agencies, and more, aiming to stop gender-based violence have been implemented over the span of several years. However, while efforts have been effective, the matter persists and the United Nations, along with further peacebuilding bodies, have been continuously attempting to find new solutions.

Definition of Key Terms

Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

Gender-based violence describes the harming of an individual or group based on their gender. Gender-Based Violence takes many forms which include physical, psychological, and sexual harm. It also refers to the acts of human trafficking, female genital mutilation, and forced and child marriages.

Human Trafficking

Human trafficking defines the crime of using force, fraud, or deception to recruit, transport, harbor, or sell people illicitly for the purpose of exploitation. Sexual servitude is a form of human trafficking in which victims are forced into engaging in sexual activities.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

Female genital mutilation refers to the partial or total alteration of the female genitalia for non-medical reasons. Perpetrators of FGM often cite cultural and social norms as the purpose for FGM, despite this being considered a violation of human rights.

Ethnic Cleansing

Ethnic cleansing refers to the systemic removal or extermination of a certain ethnic, religious, or racial group from a geographical area for several purposes, one significant one being the desire to gain sole control over a territory. Ethnic cleansing is considered a war crime, is against international law, and is a violation of basic human rights.

Impunity

Impunity describes the exemption from punishment or overall negative consequences after committing an illicit act.

Background Information

Gender-Based Violence in the Context of Armed Conflicts

Throughout military conflicts, many armed groups may utilize gender-based violence as a weapon of war, which is considered a war crime under International Law. Parties involved in a military conflict choose to use GBV, rape, and other forms of sexual abuse for purposes such as, but not limited to suppressing civilians of opposing sides and working towards ethnically cleansing a certain group. Moreover, in regions affected by conflict, members of military groups seek to abduct and sell girls into human trafficking for the purpose of sexual servitude, and, in doing so, deliberately exploit the instability of a war torn state.

Other forms of gender-based violence and exploitation which have worsened as a consequence of the presence of armed forces and the economic situations of migrants from these states are female genital mutilation, forced marriage, and forced prostitution.

In many nations, victims of violence and sexual abuse struggle to find the proper support and are unable to share their experiences. This happens largely due to many nations' stigmatization around discussing or recognizing the existence of sexual abuse and expectations of pre-marital virginity. Women also remain in danger of human trafficking and forms of sexual abuse following the end of a conflict due to the existing instability in the formerly war torn state and the vulnerability of female citizens who struggled during the conflict. This occurred following the 1994 Rwandan Genocide and the civil war in Nepal (1996-2006), and continues happening in nations such as Afghanistan following the war with the United States of America (2001-2021).

Historical Incidents of Gender-Based Violence

Historically, sexual assault and other forms of GBV have been heightened due to the presence of armed forces and conflicts.

First, sexual servitude and forced marriage are forms of sexual abuse that have been amplified during military conflicts. Throughout the Sierra Leone civil war (1991-2002),

Sierra Leonean women were often assigned as wives or sexual partners for the members of armed groups, most commonly by rebels from the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). They were raped, forced into sexual servitude, and were then labelled as the property of the fighter that they were assigned to. Following the end of the war, human trafficking and sexual exploitation has persisted as a serious issue that is still affecting Sierra Leone.

Another significant example of this was the Bosnian war from 1992 to 1995, when sexual assault was frequently used as a form of ethnic cleansing of the Bosnian peoples. Forms of sexual abuse such as systemic rape were used as weapons of war, most often by Serbian forces, and the Serb army implemented 'rape camps' in which women were tortured and raped, victims were only released once pregnant. Furthermore, women living in Bosnian villages were also subjects to gang rapes and public rapes.

During the Rwandan Genocide in 1994, women, particularly Tutsi women, were often targeted by Hutu militants and made victims of sexual assault and violence. Propaganda aimed towards Hutu men targeted Tutsi females, villainizing them and causing Hutu fighters to use rape as a strategy of war. As with many armed conflicts, violence against women was used as a weapon of war, genocide, and ethnic cleansing. Female Tutsi citizens were subject to gang rapes, female genital mutilation, or rape with sharp objects. Women and girls were also heavily exploited by means of being sold into sexual slavery and forced marriage.

The Role of the United Nations

The United Nations, primarily within the Security Council, has effectively established organizations and frameworks in order to combat the issue of gender based-violence and exploitation due to the presence of armed forces.

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) is one of the primary agencies working to counter the issue of gender-based violence towards women in warzones. UNFPA works alongside governments, women and youth organizations, civil society organizations, and

several other partners for the purposes of halting violence against women. In order to prevent gender-based violence, UNFPA educates men and boys about the harmful practices against women and girls and aims to nurture positive gender-equitable values through this. When working with UN Member States, it aids governments in implementing and strengthening key international agreements, accountability frameworks, and national policies. Moreover, UNFPA works to collect data in order to recognize and understand the prevalence of gender-based violence worldwide. It has provided victims in many countries with support, such as in Yemen where UNFPA has set up safe spaces for women and girls which include counseling, protection, and legal aid. In 2023 alone, UNFPA provided over 75,000 Yemeni survivors of gender-based violence with psychological aid.

Furthermore, one significant agenda which stemmed from the UN Peacekeeping body is 'Women, Peace, and Security' (WPS) which recognizes and emphasizes the impact that armed forces have on women, particularly those living in conflict zones. WPS was first established and implemented in 2000 when Security Council Resolution 1325 passed, highlighting the impact of armed forces on women and the need for the representation of female voices in discussions to combat the issue. Moreover, Resolution 1325 also exhibited the four main priorities of WPS: preventing conflict-related sexual violence, promoting women's participation in political processes, advocating for women's involvement in all peacekeeping efforts, and analyzing gender-sensitive conflicts.

Countries and Organizations Involved

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

Armed conflict has been prevalent in the Democratic Republic of Congo since 1996 when the First Congo War took place, and has continued to escalate over the past 30 years. Several other conflicts between the DRC and its neighboring countries, along with prominent rebel groups from the region have emerged throughout the 21st century, such as the ongoing conflict with the March 23 Movement (M23), a rebel group primarily made up of ethnic Tutsies, and Rwanda and Uganda's military presence in the Congo. In addition to this, in recent years the DRC has also suffered from the proliferation of mining operations within the nation as it is home to large reserves of rare earth minerals and metals. This has only increased the presence of several militias and armed groups which are interested in exploiting the area for its natural resources.

These existing conflicts in the Congo have caused the deaths of over 6 million civilians, displaced 7 million, and have made women and girls subject to high levels of gender-based violence and sexual exploitation. The DRC has been labelled the "rape capital of the world" as rape, sexual slavery, and female genital mutilation (FGM), along other forms of sexual violence at the hands of armed militias and government security officials have been widespread. These forms of violence are used by armed groups in order to oppress local communities, humiliate the enemy, and as a mechanism of ethnic cleansing. Women in mining regions are more susceptible to this abuse as there exists a more violent mining culture in such areas. However, within the Congo, sexual violence is heavily stigmatized and the government has not provided a response to this issue. UNICEF, along with various other organizations focused on stopping this issue such as Amnesty International, have called for financial aid and the intervention of fellow Member States in order to increase efforts to help women and girls in the DRC.

The Republic of Yemen

Since the initiation of the civil war in Yemen in 2014, gender-based violence against women and girls has become increasingly prevalent. 4.5 million people are currently displaced in Yemen, with about 80% of them constituting women and girls. The lack of shelter options and secure environments for displaced people have limited women's abilities to access their basic needs, making women more vulnerable to potential violence and exploitation. This vulnerability has allowed for women and girls throughout Yemen to be subjects to sexual exploitation and abuse, forced labor, and overall violence.

Yemen has not put in place any legislations which specifically protect women from gender-based violence or provide victims with support. Yemen's legal system allows for men to be granted guardianship over their female relatives, does not give women the right to testify in cases relating to unlawful sex (zina), and does not include a minimum legal marriage age. These ineffective laws have made it difficult for victims of gender-based violence to be able to seek justice and have permitted for the existence of impunity for perpetrators of any form of gender-based violence or exploitation.

The Syrian Arab Republic

The Syrian Civil War (2011-Present) has taken a negative toll on Syrian women and has made them subject to increased gender-based violence and exploitation, primarily those who have been displaced as a result of the conflict. Mass displacement along with the destruction of homes has forced women to live in overcrowded living arrangements, increasing their risk of being sexually assaulted or put into an environment where they are at danger of becoming victims of gender-based violence. Furthermore, many Syrian refugees attempting to escape the armed conflict and seek asylum in foreign countries have to pay and go through migrant smugglers, posing the risk of becoming victims of human trafficking by these smugglers. This, along with the poverty that Syrian citizens

experience as a result of the war, has made it more probable that women and girls get sold into sexual exploitation, human trafficking, or forced marriage and child marriage.

Syria's legal framework in relation to the protection of women from gender-based violence has been limited over the past few years. In addition to this, the Syrian government has not implemented many of the essential legal measures to try to combat the issue that international human rights organizations, such as Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), have recommended.

Timeline of events

Pre-20th Century	Throughout history, women and girls have been subject to exploitation and sexual assault as a consequence of an ongoing armed conflict and/or as a weapon of war.
World War II (1939-1945)	During WWII, Jewish women forced into concentration camps frequently faced sexual violence and rape perpetrated by Nazi guards.
December 10th 1948	The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights was created, establishing essential basic rights, including those which state that no citizen, regardless of sex, should be subject to torture, slavery, or overall inhumane treatment.
Vietnam War (1955-1975)	Throughout the Vietnam war, violence and sexual abuse were prevalent and highly normalized. US veterans have stated that raping Vietnamese women was considered a frequent procedure and was done to maintain discipline and morale.
Sudanese Conflicts (1955-Present)	Since 1955, Sudan has been engaged in a vast number of armed conflicts. Most recently, a conflict initiated in April of 2023.
Colombian Conflict (1964-Present)	The ongoing Colombian conflict has taken a negative toll on Colombian women, making them subject to increased sexual and physical violence as a strategy of war by militants.
First Liberian Civil War (1989-2003)	Reports found that the first Liberian Civil war heightened sexual violence to an extreme extent, with the World Health Organization estimating that between 61% and 77% of women and girls were raped throughout the war.
Bosnian War (1992-1995)	Serbian forces used systematic and everyday rape as a manner of ethnic cleansing against Bosnian people. However, these acts became one of the first cases brought to and convicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia
Rwandan Genocide (1994)	Tutsi women living during the Rwandan genocide experienced many forms of sexual violence as a method for ethnic cleansing and oppression.
Kosovo War (1998-1999)	As with the Bosnian war, systematic rape was prevalent as Serb forces often sexually and physically abused ethnic Albanian women.

October 31st, 2000	United Nations Resolution 1325, which is recognized as the first key UNSCR resolution regarding the impact of conflict on women. Resolution 1325 allowed for the creation of further resolutions and agreements with a similar purpose.
US-Afghanistan War (2001-2021)	The war between the US and Afghanistan, along with other military conflicts prior, have created an emphasis on dominance, violence, and control which cause for many women to become victims or rape. Since then, along with the
US-Iraq War (2003-2011)	The presence of American forces during Iraq both endangered the safety of Iraqi women and weakened the already ineffective protections that existed. The most well known instance of this was when five US soldiers gang-raped a 14-year-old girl and later killed her and her family.
Tigray Conflict (2020-2022)	Forces aligned with the Ethiopian government often targeted women and girls living in Tigray. Women were subjected to sexual slavery, rape, and other forms of gender-based violence. Survivors received little to no psychological, financial, and medical support.
Russia-Ukraine War (2022-Present)	The ongoing, full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine has made women and girls more vulnerable to sexual assault and violence.

It is important to note that the listed events are not the only examples of conflicts in which this has occurred, gender-based violence during armed conflict is an issue that has been prevalent during many other wars.

Relevant UN Treaties and Resolutions

UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000)

Security Council Resolution 1325 was adopted on October 31st, 2000, and was crucial in allowing Member States to implement measures to combat gender-based violence caused by the presence of armed forces. Resolution 1325 recognizes that the nature of warfare has changed over the past several years, and aims to ensure that all Member States enforce and respect international laws which protect women and girls from any form of sexual abuse. In addition to this, it works to provide women with a more active role in peacebuilding efforts and discussions to avoid conflict.

UN Security Council Resolution 1820 (2008)

Security Council Resolution 1820 acknowledges that sexual violence is often used as war tactic and emphasizes that this is considered a war crime. Additionally, the Resolution demands that all Member States take appropriate and efficient measures in order to protect civilians from any form of sexual violence, these measures include implementing appropriate military disciplinary actions and excluding sexual violence crimes from amnesty provisions. Lastly, Resolution 1820 urges all Member States to instill a policy of zero tolerance of sexual assault and abolish all impunity for acts of sexual abuse.

UN Security Council Resolution 2467 (2019)

As with other resolutions, UNSC Resolution 2467 calls upon all Member States to ensure that all sexual violence committed by parties involved in an armed conflict is halted. Furthermore, it urges all Member States to enforce their respective judicial systems to eliminate sexual violence and to respect the monitoring systems implemented on past UNSC resolutions. This resolution also notes that many women and girls get pregnant as a result of sexual violence in an armed conflicts and they will need assistance to meet their needs. In addition, it calls upon member states to support organizations which work to achieve all of the aforementioned aims, and work to strengthen the process of gender

equality Finally, Resolution 2467 also notes that all Member States should provide victims of Gender-Based Violence with the proper care required by their specific needs.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Implementation of Security Council Resolutions

The United Nations Security Council has implemented several resolutions, starting with the aforementioned Resolution 1325, in order to combat the issue of gender-based violence and exploitation due to the presence of conflict and armed forces. These resolutions have worked to recognize these issues and urge Member States to implement the proper legal framework to prevent violence against women and to enforce the proper systems in order to convict those guilty of gender-based violence. Moreover, many of the applicable resolutions have worked to provide women with a more active role in discussing the topic of exploitation and GBV.

While these UNSC resolutions have not completely eradicated the issue and it stills persists, the resolutions have allowed for many Member States to implement legal framework against gender-based violence.

Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict

From the 10th to the 13th of June 2014, thousands of delegates gathered in order to discuss sexual violence as a weapon of war and accountability for perpetrators of this. The summit aimed to prevent this violence and to combat the issue of existing impunity for perpetrators of gender-based and sexual violence.

The summit allowed for delegations to discuss and raise awareness about the key issues relating to gender-based violence. With this, it established the “Declaration of Commitment to End Sexual Violence in Conflict,” a document containing numerous commitments to stop the use of rape as a weapon of war. However, only 122 Member States have adopted this declaration.

National Action Plans (NAPs)

National action plans are key frameworks which Member States implement in their respective legislations in order to combat pressing issues. As with a large number of the aforementioned UN resolutions, when discussing the topic of the impact of armed forces on exploitation and gender-based violence, NAPs primary goals are to establish legal framework and measures along with providing women with an active role in solving the problem. However, NAPs have not been fully successful in solving the issue as only 107 UN Member States have adopted an action plan for this reason.

Possible Solutions

A final resolution on solving the issue of armed forces worsening gender-based violence & the exploitation of women, more specifically in relation to sexual assault & sexual servitude should both enhance measures to prevent this violent and implement systems to aid victims of it.

Before writing and voting for or against each clause delegates should ask themselves the following questions:

- Has it been implemented before?
- If it has been implemented before, has it worked successfully?
- Is there a pragmatic example of it?
- Is it feasible?
- Is it implementable only in certain states?
- Does it comply with the UN charter? In other words, does it violate a Member State's national sovereignty? Does it force a Member State to take specific actions?

Having considered all the aforementioned, possible solutions could include:

- The creation and implementation of a confidential database that records the conduct of respective Member States' military personnel. Member States' could discuss and agree on a way in which this database is used efficiently and allows for full accountability to solve the issue.
- Establishing new measures and organizations which aid victims of gender-based violence. These measures could include providing victims with legal aid, financial assistance, counseling, and more.
- Enhancing cooperation with UN Peacekeepers in order to implement a training system in which peacekeepers are able to identify cases of sexual abuse and know how to respond to it.

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