

Women in situations of armed conflict

Gender issues cut across all sectors of society, regardless of political, economic, or social context, and this is no different for situations of political violence and armed conflict (Moser and Clark 2001). Discussions of gender issues in situations of war often present women as victims, in particular of sexual abuse and forced abduction, while men are presented as perpetrators or defenders of their nation and communities.

In the psychosocial and other literature this simplistic representation has often meant that women are seen as passive and vulnerable (helpless or defenseless) while men are associated with active aggression. More recently, these stereotypes have been challenged by authors such as Moser and Clark (2001) and Lentin (1997). These authors argue that this presentation has denied women the role of social actors, who have the ability to shape their environment and events. As a result women's involvement and participation in armed conflict, both deliberate and coerced, is not recognized. However, arguing for the recognition that women are more involved in situations of armed conflict than just as passive recipients of violence does not imply that no differences in experience and in power relations exist between men and women, nor that the experiences of men and women may not be profoundly different from one another.

Gender relations

Mary Diaz (2001) identifies three main ways in which gender differences are manifested in all societies:

- Gender roles: the activities and behaviors which are expected of women and men in social and economic life, for example, the division of labor between women and men
- Social institutions: the family, marriage, the state, and other institutions that ensure that people comply with these roles
- Cultural institutions and practices such as religion, the media, language, literature, history, etc.

In situations of armed conflict and political violence these gender differences may be reinforced, or may be changed in some way. Understanding power relations between women and men is important when trying to investigate how gender relations are changed in such situations. Cockburn (2001) identifies four 'moments' of conflict where power relations need to be considered: before armed conflict breaks out; in times of war and repression; in the processes of peacemaking; and in post-war periods. In other situations women who suffer discrimination and human rights abuses during peacetime may become actively involved in changing these situations in post-conflict situations and rebuilding their communities.

Changes in women's traditional roles can occur in situations of social upheaval (disturbance). Armed conflict can create large numbers of female-headed households when men are detained, displaced, have disappeared, or are dead (Lindsey 2001). Traditional protection and support mechanisms may no longer be operating which heightens the insecurity and danger for the women left behind. However, the situation may also mean that women are forced to take over responsibilities and activities traditionally carried out

by men. This may lead to the development of new skills and confidence as they become involved in rebuilding the lives of their own families as well as their communities: Before the war women were taken into consideration. Women were only working in the home. But when war came women came out of the house to demonstrate their capability. In part it was the war which meant that women could be taken seriously and they could do a lot of things. It made people realise that women are capable of changing society. (A woman from El Salvador, quoted in Lindsey 2001: 31) Such changes can be seen as reflecting the empowerment of women. They take place, however, in the context of poverty, loss, and deprivation, all of which strongly impact on women's lives as well as on whole communities.

Diaz 2001 http://earlybird.qeh.ox.ac.uk/rfgexp/rsp_tre/student/gender/toc.htm

Lindsey 2001 <http://www.icrc.org/web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/iwpList528/8A9A66C7DB7E128DC1256C5B0024AB36>

Experiences of women in situations of armed conflict

There is clear evidence that women suffer severe forms of abuse during, and often after, armed conflict (Moser and Clark 2001) . An example is sexual violence. In Mozambique and Rwanda mass rape was used as an instrument of war; women were abused both by their rapists and by their husbands, families, and communities who afterwards rejected them (Turshen 2001) . Sexual violence occurs frequently in all phases of armed conflict and may be carried out by armed forces, military groups, or civilians. Here are three further examples:

The rape of Somali women in refugee camps in Kenya while they were gathering firewood (Diaz 2001) Refugee women forced to exchange sex in return for being allowed to cross a border into South Africa (Dodson 1998)

The abduction of girls in northern Uganda by the Lord's Resistance Army. The girls were forced to work as domestic and sex slaves (Waliggo 1999)

Sexual violence against girls and women may result in pregnancy. Children born of forced maternity are more likely to suffer infanticide, stigma, neglect, and discrimination, and their mothers may be rejected and ostracized by their communities (Carpenter 2000). Domestic violence affects women during peace and war, but may be increased in situations of general poverty, disempowerment, and frustration, which frequently occur following displacement (Kumar 2001) .

Problems
Unequal access to essential services and goods, such as food, water, shelter, and health care, is a problem faced by many displaced women. Female-headed households may encounter discrimination when access to services and goods is controlled by men. Decisions about food distribution in refugee camps, for example, are often made by international organizations in consultation with male leaders who may have little understanding of the needs and circumstances of the women who prepare the food (Forbes 1992) . Women may find it difficult to access general or reproductive health care in situations of armed conflict: services (e.g., gynaecological services) may be absent, inappropriate (e.g., only male medical staff is available where this is culturally or religiously unacceptable), or inadequate. In some situations women may have to seek permission from male relatives before they can access health services (Lewis and Kieffer 1994)

Widowhood is one of the consequences that many women face in situations of armed conflict.

Widowhood frequently changes the social and economic roles of women in the household and community. While the impact varies widely between communities and societies, widows may struggle to gain access to basic goods and services, may have their rights to inheritance and land challenged, and may be relegated to a position of lesser social status in their community. In some communities, widows may not be allowed to keep their children or may have to care for dependants in the deceased husband's family. Lindsey (2001) points out that many women have organized themselves into groups to fight for their recognition and rights.

Other issues affecting women are lack of freedom of movement due to harassment and attack; access to education and training for girls and young women; and the challenges of becoming involved in income-generating activities (Diaz 2001) .

Psychosocial issues

Issues of women's health and well-being are frequently linked to one of two categories: maternal and child health, or reproductive health. This has led to the criticism that a woman's health is primarily

considered from the point of view of her reproductive or maternal functions and not in its own right (Desjarlais et al. 1995). The World Mental Health Report (Desjarlais et al., 1995) argues that such a traditional approach should be broadened to incorporate mental and physical health across the life cycle: A woman's health is her total well-being, not determined solely by biological factors and reproduction, but also by the effects of workloads, nutrition, stress, war and migration, amongst others. (Van der Kwaak et al. in World Mental Report 1995: 179). Understanding the sources of ill health for women Health relates to understanding how cultural and economic forces interact to undermine the social status of women.

Women and men share many of the same losses, deprivation, and threats of armed conflict (e.g., the destruction of homes and the killing of family members). Some experiences of violence and difficulty, however, affect either women or men, or have more severe consequences for women. Sexual violence is one example. Similarly, the loss of a spouse may alter a woman's life and status in ways that affect her ability to survive. Does it follow from this that women are more vulnerable in psychosocial terms?

The international community has responded by viewing women as more vulnerable and in need of special assistance. In Bosnia and Rwanda many agencies sought to set up a program specifically targeting women who had been raped. Richters (1998) points out that these initiatives were not always welcomed by the women concerned: they felt that they were only of interest to the agencies and the media because they were survivors of sexual violence, and that their own opinions of the type of assistance they wanted were not taken into account.

Lindsey (2001) and Turner (2001) discuss the effects of the identification of women as particularly vulnerable, pointing out, on the one hand, that this sometimes leads to more problems for women, and, on the other, that it can lead to neglect of the suffering experienced by men.

Women have different coping mechanisms from men and these need to be recognized and strengthened. In many situations of armed conflict women have organized themselves to address the issues they face (Kumar 2001). In Rwanda, for example, women's organizations such as Pro-Femmes were actively involved in shelter projects as they saw housing as an important first step for women to rebuild their lives (Newbury and Baldwin 2001). 'Capacity building' is a much-used term but in the context of empowering women to face the challenges of post-conflict or post-emergency societies, it should form part of a psychosocial program whose aim it is to help people cope.