

# Violence Against Women in Conflict Zones

## Definition of Violence

Violence is "the use of physical force so as to injure, abuse, damage, or destroy". Less conventional definitions are also used, such as the World Health Organization's definition of violence as "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation.

The definition of wartime violence is provided by the UNSC as, "rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization, and other forms of sexual violence of comparable gravity perpetrated against women, men, girls, or boys that is linked directly or indirectly (temporally, geographically or causally) to a conflict. This link may be evident in the profile of the perpetrator; the profile of the victim; in a climate of impunity or state collapse; in the cross border dimensions; and/or in violations of the terms of a ceasefire agreement".

Types of Violence:

1. **Economic** violence
2. **Psychological** violence
3. **Emotional** violence
4. **Physical** violence
5. **Sexual** violence

Conflict-related sexual violence refers to 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, according to a 2019 report by the UN Secretary General.

According to the UNHRC, Gender-based violence can be defined as, "harmful acts directed at an individual based on gender. It is rooted in gender inequality, the abuse of power and harmful norms."

## Types of Gender-Based Violence:

- Psychological Violence

This primarily encompasses isolation, withholding information, disinformation, confinement, as well as threatening behaviour.

- Physical Violence

The use of objects, weapons kicking, punching and beating are all included in this category. Even some forms of trafficking and slavery can be considered as physical violence.

- Forced Marriages

Marriage with elements of fraud, or force, or without the consent of the women is known as a forced marriage.

- Female Genital Mutilation

This is the act of removing a part or all of the female genitalia, against the will of the woman.

- Sexual Harassment

Harassment involving the use of explicit sexual overtones, as well as rewards in exchange for inappropriate and sexual activity, fall under this category.

- Forced Abortion and Sterilisation

This refers to intentionally terminating the pregnancy of a woman without informing her prior to doing so.

### **Facts and Figures**

- An estimated 20,000 to 50,000 women were raped during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the early 1990s.
- According to the National Victims' Unit of Colombia, out of the 365 victims of armed conflict in 2019, 89 percent of those people were women or girls.
- In 2019, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) verified 27 cases of conflict-related sexual violence against 15 women, 11 girls.

- According to a 1999 government survey, 37 percent of Sierra Leone's prostitutes were less than 15 years of age, and more than 80 percent were unaccompanied or displaced children.
- Research undertaken by the Human Rights Documentation Unit and the Burmese Women's Union in 2000 concluded that an estimated forty thousand Burmese women are trafficked each year into Thailand's factories, brothels, and as domestic workers.
- Findings from a 1999 study of Palestinian refugee women indicated 29.6% of women were subjected to beating at least once during their marriage with the husband the main perpetrator and 67.9% of children had been beaten at least once almost entirely by their parents.
- 18 to 40 percent of women in the Democratic Republic of Congo have experienced some form of conflict related sexual violence, according to the United Nations Women.

### **Why Are Women Affected by Conflicts**

- Adolescent Girls and Female Children face a high risk of violence during times of conflict and crisis. This is largely due to their young age and lack of maturity which makes them more vulnerable to abuse by possible perpetrators, such as family members and militants.
- Increased domestic responsibilities of younger women during conflict, especially with other family members often being involved in other work, or fighting, results in more early marriages, because of poverty brought on by conflict. In order to gain monetary benefit in the form of dowry, or reduce the amount of family members that need to be catered to, young women may be married off, often without their consent.
- Lack of access to reproductive health services is another key issue, as often this is something that many women across the world, even in normal conditions do not have access to and the added pressure of war on the socio-economic conditions of a country causes further problems for women in this regard.
- Isolation and lack of access to education Heavy domestic burdens can isolate girls from friends, school, and support networks. Girls may be denied the same access to education as boys, putting them at a disadvantage socially and economically. Unsafe livelihoods is a direct consequence of a lack of adequate education. Adolescent girls and female children may be compelled to take unsafe measures such as transactional sex and move towards prostitution to earn a livelihood – sometimes pressured by family members.

- Women and Girls with Disabilities face increased risk of abuse generally and particular risks during times of conflict that can increase the danger of physical and sexual violence. The chance of becoming disabled is already heightened during a conflict, due to the landmines, common gunfire, mutilation by armed forces and a spike in vulnerability to illnesses, as a result of reduced vaccinations, as highlighted by groups such as the Human Rights Watch. These individuals also struggle to ensure adequate representation for themselves and often their rights are not upheld. According to a study by Human Rights Watch in northern Uganda, more than a third of women with disabilities interviewed had experienced sexual or gender-based violence. Unequal access to information, limited mobility, and stigma by disabled individuals' families are all factors that culminate to create major problems for disabled women in conflict zones.
- Older Women face particular hardships during times of conflict that can put them at increased risk of violence. Weakened physical status or ill-health, being isolated from their communities, and being abandoned by family members, all result in increased hardship on older women in such areas. Their specific needs, in terms of medicines and help required on a daily basis are not catered to, causing them to face a lot of difficulties.

## Effects

1. Physical effects of conflict related sexual violence include sexually transmitted diseases, such as HIV, unwanted pregnancies and consequently abortions, as well as traumatic genital inflammatory disease. Lack of protection for women and absence of adequate health facilities in conflict stricken areas increases the risk faced by women.
2. Psychological impacts range from constant feelings of depression, fear and anxiety. Often victims suffer from long term trauma, long after the incident, which can make them inclined towards committing suicide. PTSD- post-traumatic stress disorder is also common.
3. Societal effects primarily revolve around a lack of understanding by society regarding the situation of the woman. Men often abandon their wives if they are subjected to rape, and women may also suffer from isolation by society. If a woman is infected with HIV/AIDs, then she may be excluded from society as a whole.

## Laws

International Human Rights Law:

Sexual Violence in Conflict and Conflict-related sexual violence has been one area of specific focus and increased attention within the Women, Peace and Security agenda, in particular since the establishment of UN Action against Sexual Violence in Conflict in 2007.

Developed by Jeanne Ward and UN Women December 2013 48 the first SRSG-SVC framed a five-point priority agenda:

1. Ending impunity
2. Empowering women to seek redress and claim their rights
3. Mobilize political leadership
4. Increase recognition of rape as a tactic and consequence of conflict
5. Ensure a coordinated response from the UN system through the interagency network UN Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict.

UN Bodies:

UN Women is supporting the establishment and work of networks such as the:

1. African Network of Women in Conflict Prevention and Peace Mediation (FemWise-Africa)
2. Mediterranean Women Mediators Network
3. Commonwealth Women Mediators Network
4. African Women Leaders Network

UN Resolutions:

1. UN Security Council Resolution 2122 on sexual violence in conflict
2. UN Security Council Resolution 2106 on sexual violence in conflict
3. UN Security Council resolution 1888 (2009)
4. UN Security Council resolution 1889 (2009)
5. UN Security Council resolution 1820 (2008) on sexual violence during wars
6. UN Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) on women and peace and security