

Sexual Violence in Conflict

The use of sexual violence as a tactic and weapon of war is recognized, codified and prosecuted as one of the most serious violations of International Humanitarian Law, International Human Rights Law and International Criminal Law. Rape, and other forms of sexual violence perpetrated during times of conflict, can be defined as crimes against humanity and war crimes.

Definitions

NATO defines Conflict-Related Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (CR-SGBV) as: **“Any sexual and/or gender-based violence against an individual or group of individuals, used or commissioned in relation to a crisis or an armed conflict”**¹.

There are other forms of sexual violence, but CR-SGBV is unique in that it is used or commissioned in relation to an armed conflict, usually to gain political or military advantage.



Source: NATO Review

Other forms of sexual violence

Sexual exploitation and abuse – occurs when people abuse a position of power against people with less power or an inability to consent. Usually refers to actions committed by members of an organization (often with a protection mandate) against members of the local civilian population.

Sexual and Gender-Based Violence – an umbrella term for any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person’s will and that is based on socially ascribed gender differences. It can happen in peaceful or conflict environments. Examples include domestic violence, trafficking, forced marriage and harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation or honor killings.

Survivor sex – the exchange of sex or sexual favours for resources needed to survive, e.g. food, accommodation, money, medicine.

NATO’s role in combatting CR-SGBV

NATO forces are guided by the relevant Military Guidelines², which set out the following tasks:

- a. Military Commanders must undertake, either within their organization, or in close coordination with international or local actors, measures to prevent and respond to CR-SGBV;
- b. NATO-led forces will endeavour to develop the analytical tools necessary to understand the level of risk of CR-SGBV for information collection and reporting, including the development of early warning indicators;
- c. Cooperation with the local level UN working group on conflict related sexual violence.



“Violence against women and children, particularly sexual violence, is an increasing feature of conflict and insecurity worldwide. This is rape used as a weapon to achieve military or political goals. It affects men and boys as well as women and girls. It is used as a tool of political control, terrorism and ethnic cleansing.”

UNHCR Special Envoy Angelina Jolie

1 NATO Military Guidelines on the Prevention of, and Response to, Conflict-Related Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, 2017

2 MCM-0009-2015; Military Guidelines on the prevention of, and response to, Conflict Related Sexual and Gender Based Violence

Examples of CR-SGBV

The case of the Balkans: CR-SGBV as a weapon of war

The wars in the Balkans in the 1990s witnessed soldiers or militia use rape as a tactic of war to cause psychological and physical harm to women and girls. Estimates of the number of women sexually assaulted during the conflict vary from 10,000 to 60,000. The UN Commission of Experts concluded that “rape has been committed by all sides to the conflict³”: soldiers and militia assaulted women in the streets and in their homes, and some soldiers held women and girls in concentration camps, a few of which were known as “rape camps”. The war also saw the targeting of men and boys. The widespread use of sexual violence as a tactic of war resulted in landmark rulings from the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia identifying rape as a crime against humanity. More than two decades after the end of the conflict, survivors of wartime sexual violence continue to suffer the enduring effects of the crime, including socioeconomic marginalization and stigma.

“Ultimately in tackling sexual violence against women and girls, we do more than help individual victims; we set a tone for the respect for fundamental dignities and human rights. By doing this we can lay a foundation for lasting stability.”

NATO Secretary General’s Special Representative for Women, Peace and Security Clare Hutchinson

Iraq: multiple motives for the use of CR-SGBV

Since the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/ Da’esh) in 2014, civilians have been subjected to CR-SGBV on a horrific scale, notably during the brutal attacks by ISIL on Mosul, Sinjar, Tall’Afar and the Ninewa plains in the north. Such violations committed by ISIL, primarily against ethnic and religious minority groups pursuant to the ISIL policy to suppress, expel or destroy those groups. Women and girls living under ISIL occupation endured forced and coerced marriages, in which rape was used as a weapon of punishment for disobeying ISIL rules. Thousands of Iraqi Yazidi women and girls were trafficked into and across the Syrian Arab Republic, where they have been used as sex slaves as part of the terrorist group’s ongoing campaign of targeting members of minority groups. The trafficking, including the sale and trade of women and children, are a source of income for the terrorist network.



Source: NATO Review

Suggested reading/other sources of information:

- Hirschauer, S. (2014). *The securitization of rape: Women, war and sexual violence*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Crawford, K. F. (2017). *Wartime sexual violence: From silence to condemnation of a weapon of war*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- United States Institute for Peace. (2019) Preventing Conflict-Related Sexual Violence. (2018, July 24) <https://www.usip.org/programs/preventing-conflict-related-sexual-violence>
- Jolie, A., Headington, T., King, G., & Moore, T. (Directors). (2011). *In the Land of Blood and Honey* [Motion picture]. United States: FilmDistrict.
- Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (Producer). (2014, November 19). *The Silent Scream* [Short Film]. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WkhpuF4cyoM>

For more information please refer to the Introductory Resource Guide on Women, Peace and Human Security.

“We must shine a bright light on these darkest of crimes. Increased awareness will help put gender violence higher on the agenda, and contribute to changing behaviour”.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg

3 http://www.icty.org/x/file/About/OTP/un_commission_of_experts_report1994_en.pdf

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