



The changing face of war

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1. "The bad news"

My lightning visit to the Wilton Park conference on "Women Targeted by Armed Conflict: What Role for Military Peacekeepers?" last Wednesday was a real eye-opener. Since this trip was sandwiched between [International Peacekeeping Day](#) [1] on Thursday and Tuesday's release of a new [report by Save the Children UK](#) [2] showing that girls and boys in conflict-affected countries such as Sudan, the Ivory Coast and Haiti fail to report sexual exploitation and abuse by some humanitarian aid workers and UN peacekeeping troops through fear, you might expect this revelation to contain further information about abusive peacekeepers. Actually, the eye-opener was about the nature of war today.

The hall and flanking sitting rooms were crammed with high-level military commanders, tacticians and academics with experience of peacekeeping operations; policy-makers from major troop contributing countries (TCCs) and those affected by armed conflict; police commanders, representatives from regional security organisations, the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations ([DPKO](#) [3]) and other high level UN representation. They were all there to address the uncomfortable fact that today, as Patrick Commaert, a Major General recently retired from the Netherlands Armed Forces, put it: "It has probably become more dangerous to be a woman than a soldier in armed conflicts."

This is because of the changing nature of warfare, as a result of which civilians are increasingly not just random, incidental victims of conflict - collateral damage - but targets of it. Captive male combatants are also subjected to sexual torture and terror, but women and girls are the majority of civilians targeted for this particular form of atrocity, on a frightful scale: three out of four women in parts of the Eastern Kivus in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC); 90% of all females above the age of three in parts of Liberia; up to 50% of women and girls in Sierra Leone. This sexual violence against women is not confined to rape. International law now encompasses within this definition forced prostitution; sexual slavery; forced impregnation; forced maternity; forced termination of pregnancy; enforced sterilization; indecent assault; trafficking; inappropriate medical examinations and strip searches. These acts amount to a method of

warfare when they are used systematically to torture, injure, extract information, degrade, threaten, intimidate or punish in relation to an armed conflict.

For millennia, sexual violence and rape have been attributed to the opportunistic behaviour of renegade combatants preying on female civilians during the fog of war. After the experiences of the Second World War, the 1949 Geneva Conventions included explicit reference to rape, calling for women to be "especially protected against any attack on their honour, in particular against rape, enforced prostitution, or any form of indecent assault." It is interesting to see that this talk of "honour" has been subsequently interpreted by judicial bodies as an attack against the psychological and physical integrity of the victim as an individual, rather than as a community symbol - since it is precisely social, political and religious norms identifying women and girls as the property of men that has turned them into such potent tools of war, when violence against women constitutes a direct attack on the values or "honour" of the enemy community.

But now there is gathering evidence of commanders 'turning a blind eye' towards mass actions, as well as explicit command leading to sexual violence and humiliation. It was the sheer scale and magnitude of sexual violence in the Balkans and Rwanda that made this impossible for the world to ignore. Today, this is a recognised characteristic of recent conflicts on the Security Council's agenda in Bosnia, Rwanda, Sudan, Haiti, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, Somalia, Chad - the list continues. There are of course problems with gathering evidence. In particular in the case of women who have been raped, atrocities go unreported because the community's reaction is often to stigmatise the victim rather than prosecute the perpetrator. Only 2% of the perpetrators of reported cases of rape in the DRC province of South Kivu were taken to court. Even if a perpetrator was arrested, he will be released when an agreement is reached outside court with the family of the victim. Meanwhile, a study conducted there suggested that 45% of raped women were subsequently rejected by their husbands.

There is a new understanding among peacekeepers as well of the spiral of descent that can grip these conflict zones. Peacekeepers make a key distinction between 'widespread and systematic' sexual violence and that which is 'widespread and opportunistic'. The former is a crime against humanity - an organised campaign directed against the civilian population contrary to international law. The conference press briefing contained a thought-provoking definition: this is 'rape as a sexual manifestation of aggression, rather than an aggressive manifestation of sexuality.' 'Widespread and opportunistic' sexual violence however describes something very different. When rape is perpetrated on a massive scale with apparent impunity by armed actors, state and non-state alike, ordinary citizens may feel they too can get away with it, and they do. Rape becomes socially normalised and generalised.

This happens in traumatised post-conflict societies, where demobilised militias flood back into communities awash with small arms and light weapons, "without the requisite psychological debrief for reintegration into civilian life and standards." Peacekeepers find that this sort of social breakdown makes a mockery of efforts to reassert the rule of law, and profoundly undermines community recovery and the long-term sustainability of any

peace efforts. It also poses massive tactical challenges to peacekeepers because of the vast range of contexts in which it occurs, in homes, streets, fields or woods.

The current climate of impunity in most post conflict contexts allows the many forms of gender-based violence, including sexual violence, to flourish. In a climate of impunity, sexual violence can be safely committed without perpetrators risking arrest, prosecution or punishment. When this happens, there is a risk that sexual violence will degenerate into a widespread and systematic crime. Often the political will to end the vicious cycle of impunity does not exist. In the DRC, for example, all armed groups involved in the conflict have perpetrated sexual violence against women and girls, and Government security forces have become the largest violator of human rights. It is in such degenerated contexts as those in the DRC, Liberia and Haiti, that a minority of UN personnel and other international actors have also been implicated in perpetrating sexual violence. In Wilton Park, military peacekeepers were gathered to discuss not just the implied leadership problem behind infringements by their own personnel and the growing call for a revival of a dedicated unit to deal with it - but the much wider challenge of what to do about this new form of conflict. It is a carnage that the military has been slow simply to see - and to acknowledge as the major security issue that it is.

Women targeted by armed conflict

Read the four reports from the conference

[The changing face of war](#) [4]

[Protecting women and girls in conflict](#) [5]

[Sexual Violence not just a gender issue](#) [6]

[Pray the devil back to hell](#) [7]

[Stop rape now](#) [8]: UN action against sexual violence in conflict

Also on openDemocracy: Anne-Marie Goetz, "[War and sexual violence: an issue of security](#) [9]" plus an [interview with John Holmes](#) [10], UN Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs

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Links:

[1] <http://www.un.org/depts/dhl/peacekeepers/>

[2] http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/en/54_5706.htm

- [3] <http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/>
- [4] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/blog/rosemary-bechler/2008/06/03/the-changing-face-of-war>
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