

# A Serious Health Issue



Source: BBC documentary

## Violence against Women and Girls in Conflict

In conflict, women suffer excessively as a result of sexual and other forms of violence. In times of conflict, sexual violence is often used as a weapon of war. Examples of this, to name but a few, include Bosnia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kosovo, Sudan, Sierra Leone, and Uganda. Violence against women has serious health consequences, including disability, unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS, and psychological problems. Violence against women in conflict and the health consequences that stem from this affect all spheres of a woman's life, including her autonomy, productivity, and capacity to care for herself and her family. This type of violence often leaves women incapable of dealing with the direct consequences of conflict and therefore, prevents women from having a critical and active role in peace processes, access to justice, education and sustainable livelihoods<sup>1</sup>.

### A Costly and Long Term Public Health Issue.

- The general level of suffering of the population is usually very high in a country where chronic conflict has taken a dramatic toll and the health system is unable to cope. Health units, health professionals, and medical supplies have all suffered as a consequence of the long-term conflict, resulting in lower levels of access, availability, and quality of health care<sup>2</sup>;
- Violence against women can have long-term health consequences, for example, sexually transmitted diseases, fistulae, chronic depression or post traumatic stress disorder. For many victims, the health consequences can carry on into their adult lives<sup>3</sup>;
- At least one in three women globally has been physically or sexually abused at some time in her life<sup>4</sup>; in conflict this figure is assumed to be higher;



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[http://www.unicef.org/emerg/indoc\\_47517.html](http://www.unicef.org/emerg/indoc_47517.html)

- Survivors of sexual violence may become pregnant and/or infected with sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS. As a result they may be subject to threats, reprisal, social isolation or death;
- Studies have found that sexual assault survivors report more health problems and poorer perceptions of their health compared with non-victims<sup>5</sup>; and
- In Rwanda, at least 250,000, and perhaps as many as 500,000, women were raped during the 1994 genocide<sup>6</sup>.

### **Violence Against Women in Conflict is a cause and consequence of growing rate of HIV/AIDS and Sexually transmitted Infections (STIs).**

- More adult women – globally, *and in every region* – than ever before are living with HIV<sup>7</sup>;
- In sub-Saharan Africa, 24.7 million people live with HIV/AIDS<sup>8</sup> of which 57% of the adults are women;
- Every day, 500,000 young people, mostly women are infected with an STI<sup>9</sup>;
- Many conflicts take place in settings with high prevalence of HIV/AIDS and STIs, and rapid and high rates of transmission are often associated with the context of armed conflicts and natural disasters<sup>10</sup>; and
- 80-90% of the global burden of STIs occurs in the developing world<sup>11</sup>.

### **Violence Against Women in Conflict negatively impacts Reproductive Health.**

- Reports on rape during conflict detail profound brutality towards women and girls, including serious beatings, mutilation or removal of the genitals, rape with sharp objects, and gunshots of the genitals. Others have witnessed the death of friends and family members from similar forms of brutality<sup>12</sup>;
- 99% of maternal deaths occur in the developing world<sup>13</sup>, and in conflict areas the numbers of maternal death are very high. Eastern DRC's maternal death rate is 1,174 per 100,000 live births;
- Worldwide, every minute, a woman dies as a result of pregnancies and childbirth complications<sup>14</sup>;
- Violence against women in conflict might increase the rate of unsafe abortion, due to an increase in unwanted pregnancies. For example in Uganda, the rate for unsafe abortion in Northern Uganda is 70 per 1000 women, compared to 54 per 1000 women in Uganda as a whole; and
- The issue of traumatic fistula is a serious and often neglected problem.

### **Violence Against Women in Conflict impacts on Psychological Health.**

- Women survivors of violence are six times more likely to report experiencing mental distress than non-abused women<sup>15</sup>;
- Psychological problems are often long-term;
- Research suggests that women endure enormous psychological suffering because of the sexual violence they experience in or outside conflict settings. Many are severely depressed or anxious, while others display symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Without addressing this, these women will not be able to fully participate in the re-building of their societies after conflict; and
- A traumatic event like rape has been directly associated with substance abuse, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. These disorders may be associated with the victim's overall neglect of her health, such as avoiding adequate health care<sup>16</sup>.

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### Recommendations

In order to fully implement the EU policy commitments, we urge the EU to:

- Prioritize the provision of accessible and quality health care for survivors of sexual violence. Prevent and respond to sexual violence in all planning and funding frameworks for humanitarian response, peace building, recovery, development and political dialogue, and link relief and development funding to ensure the continuity of sexual violence prevention and response<sup>17</sup>;
- Ensure that in countries with known high prevalence of Violence Against Women in Conflict, programmes are funded that identify comprehensive opportunities for action across sectors, including sexual and reproductive health and the prevention, treatment and care for HIV/AIDS;
- Comprehensive medical care for survivors. All survivors of sexual violence in crisis settings need access to justice, social and family re-integration, and economic integration programs. The goal should be that each survivor can contribute to her own well being and self-sufficiency;
- Support the implementation of comprehensive programs to address the multiple needs of survivors; and
- Include in national plans the prevention of gender-based violence as an indicator of good governance to be used as an element in determining access to funding, including financial incentives.



[http://www.unicef.be/home\\_sub/detail.cfm?menu\\_id=951](http://www.unicef.be/home_sub/detail.cfm?menu_id=951)

### The Brussels Ad hoc Working Group includes:

CARE International, Cordaid, International Rescue Committee, Justitia et Pax, Marie Stopes International, Médecins Sans Frontières Belgium, Pax Christi International, EurAc Network, Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l'Homme, World Organization Against Torture-OMCT, and PLAN International.

### The observers to this group are:

The Brussels Offices of UNHCR, UNFPA, UNICEF and UNIFEM; Human Right Watch and ISIS Europe.

1 For more information on these aspects of Violence Against Women in Conflict, see the other fact sheets.

2 The Lancet 2002, De Jong, K et al. The psychological Trauma of Civil War in Sri Lanka.

3 World Health Organisation (1997), "Violence against women as a priority health issue" Statement of the WHO Director-General. <http://www.who.int/gender/violence/en/v3.pdf>

4 Heise, L., et al. (1999). Ending violence against Women. Population Reports L (11). Baltimore: Population Information Program, John Hopkins University School of Public Health) <http://www.infoforhealth.org/>

5 Terri Weaver, Heidi Resnick, Impact of Violence Against Women on Their Physical Health, <http://www.musc.edu/vawprevention/research/healthimpacts.html>

6 Human Rights Watch (1996), Shattered lives: Sexual Violence during the Rwandan Genocide and its Aftermath, <http://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports/1996/Rwanda.htm>

7 *Ibidem*.

8 UNAIDS (2006), AIDS Epidemic update, December 2006, [http://data.unaids.org/pub/EpiReport/2006/2006\\_epiupdate\\_en.pdf](http://data.unaids.org/pub/EpiReport/2006/2006_epiupdate_en.pdf)

9 RAISE fact sheet (2007), <http://www.raiseinitiative.org/library/#factsheets>

10 DG ECHO HIV Guidelines (2008)

11 World Health Organisation (2006). 'Prevention and Control of Sexually Transmitted Infections: Draft Global Strategy.' <http://www.who.int/reproductive-health/docs/a59r19.en.pdf>

12 Human Rights Watch (2002), The War Within the War: Sexual Violence Against Women and Girls in Eastern Congo. A Human Rights Watch Report.

<http://www.hrw.org/reports/2002/drc/>

13 UNFPA (2005), "Reproductive Health Fact Sheet" (New York: UNFPA) [http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2005/presskit/factsheets/facts\\_rh.htm](http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2005/presskit/factsheets/facts_rh.htm)

14 <http://www.who.int/reproductive-health/publications/articles/article4.pdf>

15 World Health Organisation (1997), Violence against Women: health consequences, <http://www.who.int/gender/violence/v8.pdf>

16 Terri Weaver, Heidi Resnick, Impact of Violence Against Women on Their Physical Health, <http://www.musc.edu/vawprevention/research/healthimpacts.html>

17 Recommendations from the The Brussels Call to Action to Address Sexual Violence in Conflict and Beyond, <http://www.unfpa.org/emergencies/symposium06/docs/brusselscalltoactionfinal.doc>

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### What is being done by the EU?

Many studies, research, policy documents, Parliamentary resolutions and UN texts have been dedicated to the subject of Violence Against Women in Conflict. The following highlights what is being done at the EU Policy level:

- GAERC Council Conclusions – December 2008 [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressData/en/gena/104617.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/gena/104617.pdf)- in which the council approves the following documents;
- EU guidelines on ‘violence against women and girls and combating all forms of discrimination against them’ (page 35); [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/cms3\\_fo/showPage.asp?id=822&lang=en](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/cms3_fo/showPage.asp?id=822&lang=en)
- A comprehensive approach to the EU implementation of UN resolution on peace and security council resolutions 1325 and 1820, December 2008;
- EU conclusions on combating violence against women (pages 40-41) (<http://register.consilium.europa.eu/pdf/en/08/st16/st16520.en08.pdf>);
- GAERC Council Conclusions sur la lutte contre les violences à l’égard des femmes, notamment dans le cadre de la PESD, et toutes les formes de discriminations à leur encontre, 8 December 2008 [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressData/fr/gena/104579.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/fr/gena/104579.pdf);
- EPSCO Council Conclusions of 17 Dec 2008, on the review of the implementation by the Member States and the EU institutions of the Beijing Platform for Action – Women and Armed Conflicts. See article 14c on RH: [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressdata/en/lsa/104821.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/en/lsa/104821.pdf);
- EU Council Conclusions (May 2008): Speeding up progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)
- <http://www.epp-ed.eu/seescee/docs/councilpres.pdf> (June 2008);
- EU Council Conclusions on the ICPD@10, 24 November 2004, in which it highlights the importance to pay attention to the SRHR of women in crisis settings, art. 13 <http://register.consilium.eu.int/pdf/en/04/st15/st15157.en04.pdf>;
- The EU humanitarian consensus - which includes reference to GBV and the SPHERE<sup>19</sup> standards (art 40): <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServLexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2008:025:0001:0012:EN:PDF>;
- EU Consensus on Development -article 94; <http://www2.dfid.gov.uk/eupresidency2005/eu-consensus-development.pdf>;
- Joint EU-Africa Strategy, 2005 (<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2005:0489:FIN:EN:PDF> );
- DG ECHO HIV Guidelines (2008). These policies are relevant to implementing partners, field experts and other donors and stakeholders;
- European Parliament adopted resolution 2005/2215 on ‘Women in armed conflicts and their role in post conflict reconstruction’; and
- European Parliament resolution on DRC and rape as a weapon of war. <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=MOTION&reference=B6-2008-0022&language=EN>



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