

Sexual violence in conflict – how do we stop it?

by Brita Fernandez Schmidt

From Congo to Iraq, sexual violence is often seen as an inevitable side-effect of war

Film director Michele Mitchell's brilliant documentary *The Uncondemned* about sexual violence during the Rwandan genocide has just gone on release in the United States and will premiere in London this week. It tells the story of the trial of Jean-Paul Akayesu, the first conviction for rape as a war crime secured in 1998 at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR). As such it is an important story to tell, but what is happening now to address the needs of survivors of sexual violence and to prevent such atrocities?

The issue of sexual violence in conflict was high on the political agenda a couple of years ago (at the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict) but now there is relative silence whilst reports of horrific abuses, such as ISIS enslaving Yazidi women and girls and the sexual exploitation of women and girl refugees coming to Europe, show no such sign of abating.

Displaced Syrian and Yazidi women in northern Iraq are facing deepening crises and a lack of critical support that threaten their basic security, economic well-being, and survival. The situation on the ground is quickly becoming desperate for many women living in camps and host communities. Many tell us their families are starving, they have no way to earn money, they are not safe, and they are struggling each day with the debilitating effects of extreme trauma.

I hear stories from all over the world of women experiencing unimaginable abuse during conflict. Fatuma's story is one that stays with me; during the Rwanda genocide she was forced to watch the murder of her husband by Hutu militia. She was raped; her pregnant belly cut open; and her baby killed. She still bears the scar today. Fatuma recovered physically, but the mental trauma remained. She was shunned by her family and community.

Sexual violence in conflict happens both as a result of general lawlessness, and as a political or military tactic. It is not specific to any era, culture or continent and it is often believed to be unpreventable – a natural side-effect of war. But it is part of a

much wider spectrum of gender-based violence, which is driven and tolerated by the same harmful norms that fail to address other forms of violence against women such as domestic violence, forced marriage, slavery or trafficking.

In South Sudan, for example, girls and young women have been forced to marry their rapists (combatant or civilian) to save them and their families from shame. In communities in Afghanistan, women have been murdered by their families in ‘honour killings’ after being raped.

To effectively prevent sexual violence against women in conflict in all its forms, we have to pull it up by its roots. This requires a widespread change of attitudes. Working with men and women, communities, the media and religious leaders to break down the social norms that portray abuse as ‘normal’ or part of ‘tradition’.

Since 2001, Women for Women International has worked with more than 13,500 men to dismantle such social norms through our Men's Engagement Classes in countries including Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria and Rwanda. Many of these men are leaders in their communities who, in turn, influence other men and the wider community.

Data from a course we run for men in Afghanistan is showing promising changes in behaviour with 41% of graduates reporting having acted to support a female victim of violence, compared to just 16% at enrolment. The proportion of men who believed that women should tolerate violence in the home also dropped dramatically after they had completed the course - from four fifths of participants at enrolment to a fifth at graduation.

This is not just about reducing violence, it's also about actively creating a more supportive environment for women, their work and participation in communities. Violence against women and girls is the biggest block to the realisation of women's rights. We all stand to gain from challenging harmful social norms and promoting women's empowerment.