

Sexual violence against men and boys

by Wynne Russell

It is well known that armed conflict and sexual violence against women and girls often go hand in hand. What is less widely recognised is that armed conflict and its aftermath also bring sexual danger for men and boys.

The great reluctance of many men and boys to report sexual violence makes it very difficult to accurately assess its scope. The limited statistics that exist almost certainly vastly under-represent the number of male victims. Nevertheless, in the last decade, sexualised violence against men and boys – including rape, sexual torture, mutilation of the genitals, sexual humiliation, sexual enslavement, forced incest and forced rape – has been reported in 25 armed conflicts across the world. If one expands this tally to include cases of sexual exploitation of boys displaced by violent conflict, the

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list encompasses the majority of the 59 armed conflicts identified in the recent Human Security Report.¹

The problem of male-directed sexual violence is not unknown to the humanitarian community. Many international organisations – UN agencies, governmental and intergovernmental organisations, INGOs, international criminal courts – have acknowledged the issue in their publications and their staff members show a high degree of individual sensitisation and concern. Nevertheless, male-directed sexual violence remains largely undocumented.

Little is known either about the scope or nature of such violence or about the psychosocial consequences for male survivors. For individual survivors, this collective ignorance leads to a lack of assistance or justice.

Organisations that have made preliminary efforts to reach out to male survivors have often been handicapped by lack of awareness of the issue on the part of survivors and staff alike. Even though male victims are included in some international tribunals’ definitions of sexual violence, the domestic laws of many countries do not include male victims in their definitions of sexual violence, particularly in cases where homosexual activity attracts legal penalties.² The human impact of this marginalisation and lack of care can only be guessed at.

Meanwhile, we remain ignorant of the place that such violence occupies in the perpetuation of conflicts or in the choice of particular forms of retaliatory violence. We do not understand its impact on post-conflict reintegration of adult or child combatants, or of civilian men forced to rape family or community members. We are unaware of how it affects the incidence of sexual and other violence against women and children, including refugees and child soldiers, during and after conflicts. From the perspective of the global trade in sex and persons, we remain ignorant of its contribution to prostitution, survival sex or trafficking in persons during and after conflicts and in refugee/IDP settings. We do not know about the relationship between conflict-related violence and sexual violence within institutions such as militaries, police forces and penal systems.

From what little published information exists on the subject, as well as the expertise of many, it is possible to make some rough observations.

Sexualised violence against men and boys can emerge in any form of conflict – from interstate wars to civil wars to localised conflicts – and in any cultural context. Both men and boys are vulnerable in conflict settings and in countries of asylum alike. Both adult men and boys are most vulnerable to sexual violence in detention. In some places over 50% of detainees reportedly experience sexualised torture. However, both adult men and boys are also vulnerable during military operations in civilian areas and in situations of military conscription or abduction into paramilitary forces. Boys, meanwhile, are also highly vulnerable in refugee/IDP settings.

In addition to acts of individual sadism, the main overt purposes of sexualised violence against men and boys appear to be torture, initiation and integration into military/paramilitary forces, punishment of individuals and a strategy of war designed to terrify, demoralise and destroy family and community cohesion.³

More fundamentally, most sexual violence is a mechanism by which men are placed or kept in a position subordinate to other men. Male-directed sexual violence helps to expose the broader phenomenon of conflict-related sexual violence, including against the women and girls who are the most numerous victims, for what it is: not ‘boys being boys’ but an exercise in power and humiliation.

What is needed

Systematic collection of data is vital. Organisations operating in conflict-affected zones should intensify efforts to identify male victims of sexual assault and create reporting categories for violence that affect male sexuality and reproductive capacity, such as mutilation of the

genitals. All data must be able to be broken down by gender and age.

Mechanisms for expert discussion on how to provide assistance for men and boy survivors need to be established. Given the extraordinary sensitivity of the issue for victims and communities alike, strategies need to be carefully thought out. Many of those I have interviewed stressed the difficulty of formulating programmes for male survivors, given that they often have very different needs from female survivors and are often extremely reluctant to discuss the violence they have suffered or its consequences. The needs of male survivors often vary widely according to cultural context. Creation of mechanisms for expert discussion both within and across cultural contexts

would help programme managers formulate effective strategies and would also help advance the field of trauma studies more generally.

Male victims need to be fully represented in international justice initiatives and their inclusion in national laws on sexual violence. The prosecution by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia⁴ of perpetrators of sexual violence against male victims and the Democratic Republic of Congo's recent extension of the crime of rape to include male victims are positive examples. Humanitarian actors should acknowledge that for male victims sexual violence is not just another form of torture. Sexual and gender-based violence is a particularly vicious attack on personal and social identity whose

psychological consequences often far outlive those of other forms of physical violence. We need to take care not to inadvertently harm other vulnerable groups. Psychosocial strategies aimed at the specific needs of male survivors must be carefully designed to avoid unintentional reinforcement of concepts of male dominance over women or of homophobia.

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1. www.humansecurityreport.info/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=28&Itemid=63
2. See article by Rodriguez p45 on DRC's recent expansion of rape laws to include both genders.
3. Thanks to Françoise Duroch of Médecins Sans Frontières for these observations.
4. www.un.org/icty