



ARMED CONFLICT AND WOMEN VICTIMS

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Abstract: *The history of war and conflict, as well as the history of mankind go side by side, and therefore, it is as old as the human civilization on the earth. The naturally present aggression in the human nature has been the driving force in the development of human species and its rapid rise on the earth. Even as we boast ourselves to have achieved very high levels of moral and ethical development, war is still a key point of human interface.*

As a matter of fact wars have devastating consequences on the society, but the women and girls are particularly severely affected because of their status in society and their sex. Civilian casualties in war and conflict risen from 5 per cent at the turn of the century, to more than 90 per cent in the wars of the 1990s, and the majority among them is women and children, in comparison to the facts about a century ago when 90 per cent of those who lost their lives were military personnel.

In the war-torn societies women face specific and devastating forms of sexual violence, which may sometimes be used systematically to attain military or political objectives. The acute shortage of resources due to war and armed conflict is another cause of great concern for the womankind. Even after the conflict is over, the sufferings of women in the form of sexual violence persist; this includes unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections and stigmatization. Modern warfare has had a devastating effect on the lives and dignity of women and girls, as well as on the health and educational services that are essential to family and community survival.

Girls, like boys, are recruited as child soldiers, although they are fewer in number and their responsibilities are usually gender specific. Girls may be "volunteers," because of family poverty and their families' inability to sustain them. Women and girls are not merely victims of war. They can perpetrate violence and can support violence perpetrated by others. They become active members of conflict if they are committed to the political, religious or economic goals of those involved in violence.

The paper attempts to investigate the consequence and harm inflicted by the warfare and conflict on the women and girls, and suggest ways to minimize the same

Key Words: *Conflict, Exploitation, Rape, Sexual abuse, Victim, Violation, War*

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1. INTRODUCTION

“It is now more dangerous to be a woman than a soldier in modern conflict”

– Major General Patrick Cammaert, former UN Peacekeeping Commander

The history of warfare by human beings dates back to the origin of our species' history. Many archaeologists believe that the first act done by Homo sapiens on the earth was that of genocide resulting in the systematic destruction of the Neanderthals although there is no lead suggesting an organized war fare, evidence points to small scale conflict that slowly drove the physically stronger Neanderthals into lesser conducive areas for survival as they were defeated by the Homo sapiens.

The in-built aggressive attitude of our species has been a strong driving force in our development and rapid rise to the dominant species on the planet-earth. Notwithstanding the fact that billions have died in warfare since the dawn of human civilization it is also a fact that most of our technological and sociological development have come from war. As we enter the 21st century it is also clear that, despite the fact that we have attained very high standards of moral and ethical development, war is still a key human interaction.

Civilian casualties in wartime risen from 5 per cent at the turn of the century, to more than 90 per cent in the wars of the 1990s, and the majority among them is women and children, in comparison to the situation about a century ago when 90 per cent of those who lost their lives were military personnel. Fact of the matter is that the entire communities suffer the consequences of armed conflict; women and girls are particularly severely affected because of their status in society and their sex. These effects differ widely in different cultures depending upon the role of women in particular societies. Parties in conflict often rape women, sometimes using systematic rape as a tactic of war. Other types of violence committed against women in armed conflict include murder, sexual slavery, forced pregnancy, forced migration and trafficking.

It is now established that women experience armed conflict in a different way than men. Though the women are a minority of combatants and perpetrators, they are the greatest victims of war. War often exacerbates inequalities that exist in different forms and to varying degrees in all societies and that make women particularly vulnerable when armed conflict breaks out. The great majority of the more than one billion people, living in poverty today, are women. Moreover, they are at the receiving end in regard to education and social



development, and are considerably less mobile because of their traditional role in caring for others.

The consequences of armed conflict and violations of human rights are heavily and disproportionately borne by women; this includes the acts of terror, torture, disappearance, rape, ethnic cleansing, family separation and displacement. Furthermore, they suffer from lifelong social and psychological traumas. All tactics are employed, from systematic rape, to scorched earth tactics that destroy crops and poison wells, to ethnic cleansing and genocide. Sexual abuse is also used more often as a systematic policy of war, deployed to terrorize civilian communities. In some raids during the carnage virtually every adolescent girl who survived militia attack is later raped.

In the war-torn societies women face specific and devastating forms of sexual violence, which may sometimes be used systematically to attain military or political objectives. The first prey of the infrastructure breakdown is women as they strive hard to keep families intact and care for the wounded. They suffer the psychosocial impact as their loved ones are killed and they witness horrible scenes of violence against their families and neighbors. They are at heightened risk of diseases, including sexually transmitted diseases. Armed conflict increases the rate of new infections across affected populations, but women and girls are significantly more likely to become infected than men and boys. A recent post-conflict study in Africa found that the HIV- infection rate of adolescent girls was four times that of adolescent boys. Rape, the inability to negotiate safe sex, and sexual exploitation are risks that have disproportionately impacted women and girls.

The resource depletion due to war and armed conflict is another cause of great concern for the women. Even after the conflict is over, the sufferings of women in the form of sexual violence persist; this includes unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections and stigmatization. As a consequence of insecurity and impunity widespread sexual violence may continue or even increase in the aftermath of conflict. One of the most sensitive issues is the horrifying impact of gender-based violence at societal, community and individual levels during conflict and reconstruction. Women and girls, particularly adolescent girls, require special protection measures. Their needs should be at the centre of all the humanitarian aids, reconstruction and rehabilitation measures.



The corner stone of economic growth, development and the empowerment of women are Peace and security, and women must play an equal part in securing and maintaining peace. For this we need to empower women politically and economically, and they must be represented adequately at all levels of decision-making. Women and girls constitute close to 80 per cent of internally displaced people and refugees worldwide. Although war has always victimized noncombatants, contemporary armed conflict exploits, maims and kills civilians more ruthlessly and systematically than ever before.

The specific experience of women and girls in armed conflicts greatly depends upon their status in societies before armed conflict breaks out. Where cultures of violence and discrimination against women and girls exist prior to conflict, these abuses are likely to be exacerbated during conflict. Similarly, if women are not allowed to be part of decision-making before conflict, it is usually extremely difficult for them to become involved in decisions during the conflict itself or the peace process and post-conflict period. Thus, gender relations in pre-conflict situations as shaped by ethnicity, class, caste and age often set the stage for women's and girls' experiences and options during and after armed conflict.

2. OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of the study are summarized below:-

- To find out the pattern of modern day warfare
- To ascertain the causes of victimization of women and girls in the armed conflict
- To find out the effects of armed conflict on the women and girls
- What can be done to minimize the victimization of women during and after the war

3. METHODOLOGY

This research is theoretical study based on secondary data and a thorough analysis of the reports, articles, journals, magazines and the Inter-net.. Additionally some parents and academicians were interviewed through unstructured questionnaire to investigate deeper insight into the subject matter of the study.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the war-torn societies women face specific and devastating forms of sexual violence, which may sometimes be used systematically to attain military or political objectives. The first prey of the infrastructure breakdown is women as they strive hard to keep families



intact and care for the wounded. They suffer the psychosocial impact as their loved ones are killed and they witness horrible scenes of violence against their families and neighbors. They are at heightened risk of diseases, including sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS.

Now-a-days the modern wars and conflicts involve lesser confrontation between professional armies rather there are grinding struggles between military and civilians or between hostile groups of armed civilians within the country. Most of the wars are essentially low-intensity internal conflicts, and they are lasting longer. The days are gone when professional soldiers used to face off in the battle field far from towns and cities in a set-piece of battle. Today, wars are fought from apartment windows and in the lanes of villages and suburbs, where distinctions between combatant and non-combatant are very hard to make.

Civilian casualties in wartime have risen from 5 per cent at the turn of the century, to 15 per cent during World War I, to 65 per cent by the end of World War II, to more than 90 per cent in the wars of the 1990s. Children are not spared. It is estimated that 500,000 under-five-year-olds died as a result of armed conflicts in 1992 alone. Today's wars employ any and all tactics from systematic rape, to scorched earth tactics that destroy crops and poison wells, to ethnic cleansing and genocide.

Women play key roles in economic, social and family life, and are most affected by reproductive health problems. Women already have compromised health and social indicators, and the added stresses can result in poorer health outcomes. These stresses include subjection to sexual violence, abuse, trauma, harassment, starvation, poor water and shelter, loss of family and possessions, and death, among others. Investing in women's reproductive health has positive effects on entire communities, as women are often the sole caretakers for extended families, including children and elders.

Young people are persistently underserved in the aftermath of conflict although they endure profound losses at a crucial developmental stage. Young women are at heightened risk during forced migration from abduction, forced recruitment as child soldiers into armed forces, sexual violence and abuse and increased risk of STIs.

The impact of conflicts on women and girls' reproductive and sexual health can never be underestimated. Their psychological, reproductive and overall well-being is often severely compromised in times of conflict. Conflicts tend to increase the incidence of sexual violence;



rape; sexually transmitted infections including HIV/AIDS; and unwanted pregnancies. Moreover, essential social services, such as medical facilities, on which women heavily depend for their well-being, are greatly impacted and badly disrupted by wars.

Reproductive health in conflict settings is highly politicized. Displaced communities can feel that they are targets of pogroms for ethnic reasons. Host populations can feel resentful of refugees who are seen as receiving better services than they are. In the international community, some agencies and NGOs feel they have the right to withhold reproductive health services as well as to interfere with other agencies' attempts to provide services.

There are four primary aspects of reproductive health to consider in conflict situations, those of family planning, safe motherhood and emergency obstetrics, gender-based violence and STIs. When family planning services in refugee settings are designed in collaboration with community representatives, and are available and accessible to the community, family planning prevalence increases. Without safe motherhood interventions, many refugee women and their newborns will die needlessly.

- **The impact of conflict on reproductive health.** Women are exposed to highest degree of health threat due to war. Social inequality, cultural and economic disparity compounded by poverty produces a situation wherein women are susceptible to sexual exploitation and abuse.
- **The impact of peacekeeping operations on host populations.** Peacekeeping forces have a significant impact, specifically affecting health-care systems, economies and local communities. Women are exploited particularly economically in the face of the steep rise of the commercial sex industry and related abuse which is linked to the presence of peacekeeping missions.
- **Gender-based violence.** Special attention must be paid on the intersection of adolescents and gender abuse, the trafficking of women and girls, and the changing role of families and communities with regard to gender justice.
- **The local community's role in rehabilitation.** The local community's role must be addressed, specifically through examining women's individual roles as well as the roles of women's groups. By exploring the polarization of gender identities, the intergenerational balance among women, and community, non-governmental



organizations (NGOs) and other agencies can introduce and maintain sustainable rehabilitation efforts.

Girl soldiers

Girls are also recruited, like their male counterpart, as child soldiers, although they are fewer in number and their responsibilities are usually gender specific. Girls may be "volunteers," more often because of family poverty and inability of their family to sustain them, or they may be forcefully seized by the military. Like boys, girls may join opposition groups for their protection, when their own parents have been killed. Unaccompanied children are also picked up by soldiers for "humanitarian" reasons. Whatever way they are enlisted, girls are required to serve as cooks, to wash clothes, and care for the wounded. In the modern day wars, girls and young women may be compelled to seek livelihood by providing sexual services. They may be forced into prostitution or other forms of sexual abuse as they need food, shelter, and safe conduct through war zones.

The Changing Nature of the Military

Women have not been active in armed forces and are in some countries still denied the right to enlist. Some countries have taken steps to increase the number of women in their armed forces recognizing the right of women to participate in their nation's military. The changing role of the military in some countries, and at the international level in particular, is moving towards the prevention of conflict, securing of peace, and the reconstruction of countries after wars and natural disasters. These new roles of the military and police provide more room for women's participation. Some examples of action include:

- Women from several member states and from the United Nations' system participate in UN peacekeeping missions and election monitoring.
- Norway has introduced specific targets for the recruitment of women into the armed forces.
- In Denmark, women have reached high levels in the military. Legislation has been enacted to allow women to be recruited under the same conditions as men, and efforts are being made to ensure that more women are promoted through the ranks.

Women as Agents of War and Peace

Women and girls are not merely victims of armed conflict. They may be active agents. They make choices, possess critical perspectives on their situations and organize and stand up



jointly in response to those situations. They can perpetrate violence and can support violence perpetrated by others. They may become active members of conflict if they are committed to the political, religious or economic goals of those involved in violence. This means taking up arms in liberation struggles, stand up against occupation or participation in struggles against inequality on race, ethnic, religious or caste lines.

Women experience armed conflict in diverse ways as victims, survivors, leaders and peacemakers. Women are rarely mere passive victims of conflict. Women can play a significant role in peacekeeping if they are properly included and genuinely supported. Women and girls often are active in peace processes before, during and after conflicts. Literate and properly informed women know the importance of peace processes and join a variety of grass-roots peace-building efforts targeted to rebuilding the economic, political, social and cultural fabric of their societies.

Post-Conflict Gains in Gender Relations

The specific experience of women and girls in armed conflicts greatly depends upon their status in societies before armed conflict breaks out. Where cultures of violence and discrimination against women and girls existed prior to conflict, these abuses are likely to be exacerbated during conflict. Similarly, if they are not allowed to participate in decision-making before conflict, it is very difficult for them to become involved in decisions during the conflict itself or the peace process in the post-conflict period. Thus, gender relations in pre-conflict situations as taught and maintained by ethnicity, class, caste and age often set the stage for women's and girls' options during and after armed conflict.

It is important to note that positive outcomes for women do exist despite the painful hardships faced by them in conflict settings. A central point to remember is that women have learnt to organize themselves to respond to the conflict at the grass-roots level, particularly attending to empowerment of women and girls.

Armed conflict more often results in a changed gender relations, which may result in gains for the women. They may acquire new status, skills and power that come from taking up new responsibilities when male heads of household are deceased. These changes in women's roles can challenge existing social norms. Women's participation in household decision making and the local economy and their ownership of land and property may be molded, to their benefit.



Women's Experience of Armed Conflict

Armed conflict is by no means always negative in its impact on women. Indeed for some women it can be a time of empowerment as they take over roles traditionally performed by men. In some cases armed conflict removes abusive partners from the home and allows women the opportunity to develop new skills. Overall, an assessment of the effect of armed conflict on women requires a consideration of a number of factors, the relevance and impact of which differ considerably among cultures and individual women within those cultures. However, it is possible to identify some common themes that warrant closer scrutiny:

- Crimes against humanity include rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy and enforced sterilization.
- War crimes include rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization, and other sexual violence constituting a grave breach of the Geneva Conventions.

Peacemaking and Peace-building

Though women have performed a variety of roles during war and in peace, especially as medical and administrative personnel and increasingly as election monitors, they have been conspicuous by their absence from formal peace negotiations and policy-making processes on war and peace. But now there is a growing understanding of the role of women in conflict resolution and the specific skills and abilities they bring to the decision-making process.

5. FINDINGS

- Today close to 90 per cent of current war casualties are civilians, the majority of whom are women and children. A century ago 90 per cent of those who lost their lives were military personnel.
- Violence against women is greatly exacerbated in conflict time. But it is important to remember that violence is often an extension of the gender discrimination that already exists in peacetime.
- Women face many challenges in conflict and post-conflict environments – including extreme poverty, displacement from their homes, destruction of social networks, and limited opportunities for employment and income generation.



- Because of their lack of status within society, women are systematically excluded from decision-making opportunities.

While the history of wars and conflicts is replete with systematic incidents of sexual violence against vulnerable women, modern-day wars have witnessed large-scale indiscriminate deployment of rape as a “weapon” of war by combatants. One striking difference between the use of rape as a weapon of war in pre-1990 conflicts and in latter-day wars is the emergence and “willful” transmission of HIV to the victims.

Sexual exploitation

There is a growing body of evidence (ICRC 2001, UNIFEM 2002) that the long-term impact of armed conflict on women and girls may be exacerbated by their social vulnerability. The harm inflicted on women and girls during and after armed conflict is disturbing and more often exposes them to further harm and violence. Sexual violence such as rape, forced impregnation, forced abortion, torture, trafficking, sexual slavery and the intentional spread of sexually transmitted diseases as weapons of warfare, and forms an integral part of many conflicts today. Women are victims of genocide and enslaved for labor. They are often viewed as culture bearers and reproducers of ‘the enemy’ and thus become prime targets.

Women are exploited because of their maternal responsibilities and attachments, which heighten their vulnerability to sexual abuse. During the time of armed conflict, sexual abuse, including acts such as rape, forced oral sex, mutilation of sexual organs, forced pregnancy, and prostitution, is used as an extension of the battlefield (Wilbers, 1994). Rape is a sexual expression of aggression and is characteristic of extreme torture; when committed during war, rape can be regarded as the ultimate symbolic humiliation of the male enemy (Seifert, 1993). Rape is not a recent phenomenon of war but is part of the history of armed conflict. Armed conflicts also have indirect negative consequences that affect agriculture, livelihoods, infrastructure, public health and welfare provision, gravely disrupting the social order.

Effects on women and girls

Contemporary warfare has had a devastating effect on the lives and dignity of women and girls, as well as on the health care and educational services that are essential to family and community survival. Since deliberate gender-based violence and discrimination are rampant in these settings, its adverse effects hit women and girls harder than it does their male



counterparts. These gender-specific threats to women and girls compound the problem of ensuring their protection. This gives rise to gaps in the design and delivery of assistance and protection. Essential services such as basic health care, including reproductive health care and counseling, are often disrupted or become inaccessible during conflict situations. This results in health risks for all affected populations. Women and girls become the individual and systematic targets of sexual violence, in particular when rape and sexual assault are used as weapons of war. Thrust of the efforts in response to the systematic application of gender-based violence must confront the aftermath of previous events, as well as education efforts related to gender and human rights.

Effects on adolescents

Adolescence is a sensitive and challenging phase of life even in the peaceful settings. When war breaks, the risks associated with adolescence increase for boys, but multiply for girls. Trauma of conflict and lack of social support and services are particularly dangerous to young people and may have lasting effects on their physical and mental health. The young adults often fall prey to the bad habit of high-risk drug use or sexual behavior when social structures break down due to war and instability.

In post-conflict settings sometimes the presence of peacekeeping mission has negative consequences on public health, of course with severe impact on women and girls. Military personnel used for peacekeeping missions are predominantly adult men from differing cultures, education statuses and, expectations for conduct. Increased demand for the commercial sex trade has serious ramifications for the entire community, particularly for the presence of sexual, physical and economic exploitation.

Displaced Women

The growing number of armed conflicts and the violations associated with them has resulted in an increase in forced internal displacement and refugee flows. As a rule of thumb, more than 75 per cent of displaced people are women and children. The abuses that women and girls suffer in armed conflicts may take various forms, such as rape, sexual slavery and forced prostitution. Women and girl refugees remain vulnerable to violence and exploitation while in flight, in the countries of asylum and during repatriation. Responses of the international community and Member States have included:



- The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has issued guidelines on the protection of refugee women, including the prevention of and response to sexual violence against them.
- UNHCR has sought to ensure that refugee women obtain adequate protection in international law, particularly in circumstances where they experience gender-based persecution.
- Several member states have recognized the importance of providing physical and psychological support to refugee women, particularly those that have suffered gender-specific abuses.

Whilst conflict inflicts suffering on everyone, women are particularly affected by its short- and long-term effects. This is due to a number of factors including: gender inequality, their status in society, and the lack of support system to protect them.



An Afghan woman writes 'peace'. Photo from the Afghan Women's Resource Centre

6. SUGGESTIONS

Putting women at the heart of peace: Women are hit hardest by war but they are excluded from national peace talks and plans – over the last 25 years only 1 in 40 peace treaty signatories have been women. It is women's right to help decide the future of their country, and when they do peace is more likely to last.

The local community's role in rehabilitation: The local community's role must be addressed, specifically through examining women's individual roles as well as the roles of their groups. By exploring the polarization of gender identities, the intergenerational balance among women, and community education, information, and dissemination, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other international organizations and agencies can introduce and maintain sustainable rehabilitation efforts.



Human rights violations: One has to realize that the impact of armed conflicts, including forced displacement, impoverishment and gender-based violence, are violations of human rights and not merely private or cultural concerns that are unavoidable outcomes of wars;

Representation of women: Implement and enforce Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) must be enforced and implemented in order to increase the political representation of women, and include them in decision-making, peace negotiations and conflict resolution mechanisms;

Gender training to policymakers: gender training must be provided to raise awareness among policymakers on the importance of including women in conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction efforts.

Local women organizations: Involve local women organizations in decision-making while conducting relief or conflict-related interventions;

Specialized services: Provide specialized services for women who suffer from violent impacts of armed conflict, including counseling and outreach programmes to manage reproductive health concerns, as well as psychological traumas resulting from armed conflict.

7. CONCLUSION

In the end of the study following points need to be specially highlighted and emphasized-

Peace-building: Peacekeeping missions can work to prevent and resolve conflicts before they begin. They facilitate peace negotiations, which shape decisions on post-conflict recovery and governance, and work to restore effective law and order.

Security and Justice: War creates serious challenges with regard to security, justice and accountability, which tend to persist long after fighting has ended. When left unaddressed, these challenges put barriers to post-conflict recovery and increase the risk of countries relapsing into conflict. Early interventions focus on the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of combatants. This consists of collecting weapons, disbanding armed groups, and reintegrating former combatants into communities.

Gender-Based Violence: Armed actors have systematically deployed sexual violence against civilians as a means to achieve military and political ends. In recent conflicts, countless women and children have been abducted into armed groups and subjected to multiple forms of abuse, including sexual slavery. And heightened violence and militarization in



society can spur increased violence at home, in schools and in the workplace. Both conflict and displacement significantly increase a country's risk of becoming a source of human trafficking, enforced prostitution and other crimes.

Post-Conflict & Humanitarian Planning: As conflict subsides and early recovery processes begin, mechanisms must be established to mobilize community-driven initiatives with quick impact, as well as interventions to support the transition to long-term development. Through direct and representative dialogue with displaced populations, humanitarian agencies can involve different groups in the design and implementation of programmes, and empower them to contribute to recovery efforts.

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