

Preventing violence against women and girls in conflict



As the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict takes place in London, UK, on June 10–13, 2014, the international community faces a propitious moment to address the horrors of sexual violence in conflict and other forms of gender-based violence. Sexual violence in conflict has occurred throughout modern history, including the targeted mass rapes and murders of women in Bangladesh's Liberation War of 1971, the systematic rape of women in the Balkans and during the Rwandan genocide in the 1990s, and current sexual abuses in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Syria.^{1,3} Until recently, most data on sexual violence in conflict have measured rape of women committed by combatants, using information from governmental, humanitarian, or human rights organisations or facility-based reports. This documentation, while informative, is likely to have captured only the most grievous cases⁴ and can overlook the multiple and inter-related types of violence during conflict, displacement, and post-war reconstruction.

Increasingly, population-based research is being used to document the wider scope of civilian women's and men's exposures to sexual and other forms of violence in different conflict settings. What is quietly emerging, but long known among humanitarian aid organisations, is that alongside conflict-related rape, violence by intimate partners is also highly prevalent and is likely to continue long after peace agreements have been signed. For instance, our research on violence against women in 12 rural districts of Côte d'Ivoire showed that 33% of women surveyed reported an experience of sexual violence since the age of 15 years.⁵ When asked to identify the perpetrator, 29% reported their husband or intimate partner, 10% reported someone other than an intimate partner, and only 0.3% identified an armed combatant. Importantly, 50% of women reported physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner before, during, and after the conflict.⁵ Population-level data from the DRC indicates a similar trend: 35% of women reported sexual violence from their intimate partner, 16% reported an experience of non-partner sexual violence, and those women living in areas of active conflict reported higher levels of sexual violence, both within and outside their families.^{6,7} In a recent systematic review of sexual violence experiences among female refugees and internally displaced people in complex humanitarian emergencies

across 14 countries, 21% of women had experienced sexual violence (intimate partner and non-partner rape).⁸ These patterns of violence against women underline the need for initiatives to respond explicitly to the breadth of sexual and physical violence in conflict settings.

Moreover, it is increasingly acknowledged that civilian men and boys are also victims of sexual violence in conflict. Recent research from the DRC, for example, suggests that between 4% and 24% of men have experienced a sexual assault,^{9–11} with the variation in prevalence reflecting differences in study populations and definitions of sexual violence. Our research in Côte d'Ivoire indicated that 6% of men reported a lifetime experience of forced or coerced sex from a non-partner.⁵ Patterns of exposure to violence also differed between men and women. In our study, 27% of men reported physical violence from other men—combatants, acquaintances, strangers, and male family members. Among women, 24% reported experiences of non-partner physical violence and they more often identified male and female family members as perpetrators of abuse.⁵ Thus, responses to violence in conflict need to take account of different patterns of vulnerability between women and men, especially the broader context of gender inequality.

The scale of violence in conflict-affected settings highlights that alongside strengthened judicial, health, and social responses and accountability measures, we need to invest in prevention. Gender-based violence prevention programming is in its relative infancy,

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especially in conflict settings, but innovative interventions are taking place. For example, interventions in emergency settings, such as Syria, aim to prevent sexual exploitation and forced marriage of young women by improving the economic situation of refugees.¹² In refugee camps, prevention programmes work to improve women's and girls' safe access to water, fuel, and sanitation facilities.¹³ In chronic and post-conflict settings, targeted behaviour change interventions are possible, including those that work directly with men.¹⁴

Rigorous evaluation research from non-conflict settings suggests that violence against women is preventable.¹⁵ At a structural level, prevention measures need to challenge legal, economic, and social structures that uphold and foster gender inequality. Within communities, a growing number of programmes include women's economic and social empowerment and participatory programming to foster gender equity between women and men.¹⁵ These programmes often seek to promote critical reflection and discussion about the causes and consequences of violence, challenge attitudes that condone violence and stigmatise its victims, and build communication and conflict resolution skills.¹⁵

Although gender-based violence in conflict has moved up the policy agenda, evidence on what comprise effective responses to sexual and other war-time abuses is limited.¹³ For example, a systematic review of intervention evaluations in humanitarian crises found only three published evaluations of projects that address violence against women.¹⁶ Another review of sexual violence prevention interventions in conflict settings identified three published evaluations which each indicated that improved protection measures resulted in a reduction in sexual violence; these studies, however, were assessed to be of low quality and none prospectively measured incidence of sexual violence.¹³ Both reviews highlight that there are currently no robust evidence or consensus on what prevention approaches should be prioritised in conflict settings. Further research is needed to determine what works and where investment is warranted.

As the Summit brings the international community together to address sexual violence in conflict, a broader, long-term vision is needed to prevent sexual and other forms of gender-based violence. Measures should be taken not only to eliminate impunity for perpetrators, but also to respond to the health and safety needs of all victims.

Investment in prevention can and should be made at all stages of a conflict. To make high-level commitments meaningful to the lives of conflict survivors, rhetoric must turn into action that not only addresses the immediate consequences of sexual violence in conflict, but also promotes gender equality and protects women from all forms of abuse.

*Mazeda Hossain, Cathy Zimmerman, Charlotte Watts
Gender Violence and Health Centre, Department of Global Health and Development, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London WC1H 9SH, UK
mazeda.hossain@lshtm.ac.uk

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