

From helplessness to agency: examining the plurality of women's experiences in armed conflict

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Abstract

Although women routinely display remarkable resilience and fortitude by adopting new roles and taking on new responsibilities when confronted by the ravages of war, they continue to be depicted by many humanitarian actors as being intrinsically weak and vulnerable – a depiction that results in the perceptible absence of women from decision-making bodies both during and in the wake of conflict. This article argues for the need to consider the plurality of women's experiences in war, including as female heads of households, as victims (and survivors) of sexual violence, as community leaders, and as armed combatants.



Red Cross postcards from the First World War have become a collectors' item. Used both to inform the general population about the war effort and to boost public opinion, these popular tools were disseminated by Red Cross National Societies throughout Europe and the United States. The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum in Geneva, Switzerland has an exhibit of these

* The views expressed in this article reflect the authors' opinions and not necessarily those of the ICRC.

postcards, many of which feature pretty Red Cross nurses in pristine white uniforms tending to wounded soldiers, usually away from the battlefield. Some of the postcards even have explicit romantic overtones, whereby the nurse serves as yet another 'medal' for the brave soldier coming home from the battlefield. Others present the nurses more as mother figures, echoing the popular notion at the time of the nurturing sphere of the feminine.¹ The central message in many of these postcards was that women must not be sullied by the brutality of war – rather, they should tend to the male soldiers far away from the field of battle, be it as lovers or as mothers. The reality, of course, was that many of these nurses were working alongside their male counterparts on the frontlines in work that was 'dirty, dangerous, disgusting [and] enormously hard and stressful'.² In fact, efforts by the US army to keep female volunteer nurses well behind the fighting proved difficult as 'women kept ignoring orders to leave the troops they were looking after and bobbing up again after they had been sent to the rear'.³

Although it took until 1961 for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to appoint its first woman delegate, today roughly 40% of all ICRC staff working in the field are women. Women are involved in every aspect of humanitarian assistance including caring for the wounded, visiting prisoners of war, and promoting international humanitarian law among armed groups, and most humanitarian organizations (including the ICRC) strive for greater gender balance among their field staff. However, while the capacity of female aid workers is no longer in question, the women who are the victims of the conflict are still viewed as being intrinsically weak. Time and again the language that is used to describe women living in a war zone is as 'vulnerable' and 'helpless' despite the remarkable capacity of these same women to adapt to and survive the violence, loss, and deprivation that goes hand in hand with war. This perception of women likewise disregards their experience of war as combatants, promoters of peace, or community leaders. While the very real protection and assistance needs of women living in armed conflict should not be overlooked, refusing to recognize their agency means that many of the most fundamental decisions regarding their security and access to material resources are taken by men.

In addition to the general protections afforded to women by international humanitarian law, the Geneva Conventions and their additional protocols also include special provisions that distil women's protection needs to the value attached to their 'honour' and to their role as mothers.⁴ However, the reality is that armed conflicts have a different impact on men, women, girls and boys and in recognition of the specific challenges facing women and the multiple roles assumed

1 Joshua Goldstein, *War and Gender*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2001, p. 309.

2 Linda Grant De Pauw, *Battle Cries and Lullabies: Women in War from Prehistory to the Present*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1998, p. 218.

3 Dorothy Schneider and Carl J. Schneider, *Into the Breach: American Women Overseas in World War*, Viking, New York, 1991, p. 135.

4 For more on how women are valued in the Geneva Conventions according to their sexual and reproductive roles, see Judith Gardam and Michelle Jarvis, *Women, Armed Conflict, and International Law*, Kluwer Law International, The Hague, 2001.

by women in situations of armed conflict, the ICRC adopted a pledge at the 27th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent in 1999 to take action to improve the protection and assistance being afforded to women. The ICRC further pledged 'to put emphasis throughout its activities on the respect which must be accorded to women and girl children (...) actively disseminating the prohibition of all forms of sexual violence to parties to an armed conflict'.⁵ The pledge was a compliment to the ICRC's mandate to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict, providing them with assistance and acting as a promoter and guardian of international humanitarian law. This initiative further ushered in a complete review of ICRC activities with the aim of identifying the principal and most pressing needs of women in situations of armed conflict and analysing and improving the ICRC's response to these needs. The resulting study, 'Women Facing War', was published in 2001⁶ and provided the framework for the ICRC's Women and War division, presently charged with incorporating the needs, perspectives, and capacities of women and girls into all ICRC activities. Where necessary, this division provides expertise and support to delegations to create separate programmes to respond to specific requirements of women – whether these are social, psychosocial, medical, economic or protection-related.

This article will begin by examining how women have traditionally been portrayed in conflict as vulnerable and helpless victims of war. This section will consider the consequences of this depiction and argue for the need to move away from these essentialist representations to a more pluralistic understanding of the roles and experiences that women have during conflict, including that of combatants. The second section of this article will look more closely at the impact of armed conflict on the lives of women and provide examples of the ICRC's multidisciplinary response to addressing the specific needs, vulnerabilities, and capacities of women affected by armed conflict.

The weaker sex?

The biological differences between men and women are undeniable – one such difference is that generally speaking, women are physically weaker than men. Although this distinction has everything to do with levels of testosterone and muscle mass, and nothing to do with women's intellect, agency, or capacity, it is too often used as a justification for sidelining the contributions and abilities of women, especially in the context of armed conflict where force has traditionally been analogous to power. In fact, the changing nature of conflict has rendered physical strength less and less relevant to military might. As Joshua Goldstein has discussed: 'Modern warfare with its emphasis on the speed and mobility of

5 ICRC Pledge Statement, *To promote the respect of women in armed conflicts*, 3 November 1999. For the full statement, see <http://www.icrc.org/web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/html/57JQ38> (last visited 15 January 2010).

6 *Women facing war*, ICRC, 2001.

mechanized vehicles (tanks, fighter aircraft, etc.), differs from ancient hand-to-hand combat. Success and survival now depend much more on the ability to execute rapid sequences of small motions, and much less on upper-body strength.⁷ Nevertheless and notwithstanding the fact that they are increasingly active participants in armed combat, women are routinely characterized as being intrinsically weak and helpless despite the plethora of evidence that suggests vulnerability is a relative term and a consequence of social, cultural, and political factors, not biology. Surprisingly, much of this rhetoric is propagated by the very humanitarian actors whose job it is to understand factors of vulnerability in order to provide targeted and relevant assistance to the victims of armed conflict which include men, women, boys and girls.

Deconstructing the myth of the helpless victim of war

Most humanitarian reports and documents depict women as harmless victims in need of protection, irrespective of the different roles that women can play in times of war. The consequence of this depiction is that women are marginalized from the decision-making bodies that deliver humanitarian assistance and may result in some of women's most basic needs being overlooked. As a practical example, it was not until the ICRC asked women living in camps directly about menstruation that it discovered that many women were restricted to their tent while menstruating because of a lack of adequate sanitary material. Today, culturally appropriate sanitary material is a staple item within ICRC hygiene kits. A lack of agency and control over their own life also creates a number of protection problems for women. For example, if women are not consulted about the location of water points or sanitary facilities, these structures may be constructed in an area that is not safe for women and exposes them to additional risks, such as sexual violence.

The current practice of neglecting to include women in humanitarian decision-making can be traced back to how women are routinely depicted in humanitarian reports, guidelines, and assessments. While women are almost always portrayed through the lens of victimhood, men are rarely mentioned as being victims of armed conflict. However, as the 2005 Human Security Report points out, '[w]ith the critically important exception of sexual violence, there is considerable evidence to suggest that men, not women, are more vulnerable to the major impacts of armed conflict'.⁸ In fact, the report goes on to suggest that not only are men more likely to die on the battlefield, but they are also more likely to be victims of 'collateral damage',⁹ presumably because men are more likely than women to occupy public spaces. Thus it is women who must pick up the pieces, support their families, raise their children on their own and keep their communities going despite the emotional, physical, and financial losses caused by the

7 J. Goldstein, above note 1, pp. 166–167.

8 *Human Security Report 2005: Assault on the vulnerable*, University of British Columbia, Canada, Part III, p. 102.

9 *Ibid.*

absence of their menfolk. Therefore, as the report rightly infers, ‘women are far more resilient and less vulnerable to the impacts of armed conflict than is suggested in much of the current humanitarian literature’,¹⁰ and given the active roles they often adopt, the perspective of women is invaluable not only in the midst of the conflict, but also with regard to conflict resolution and reconstruction in the wake of the hostilities. Despite these realities, however, women continue to be excluded from formal decision-making. Most notably, they are rarely given a seat at peace-negotiation tables, as evidenced by the fact that to date, peace talks have been overwhelmingly male-dominated based on the assumption that the male fighters who started the war are the only ones able to stop it, i.e. the same fighting men, but in peacemaking packaging.¹¹

The predominance of men among victims of mass atrocities is explained by Adam Jones as being linked to the drive of armed groups to destroy the ‘battle-age’ men of a specific community as a means of guarding against potential future adversaries. In the case of the former Yugoslavia, for example, ‘[t]he most serious atrocities committed against males primarily on gender grounds are the gender-selective executions aimed at eliminating physical resistance to Serbian occupation and “ethnic cleansing” – up to the point of eliminating future generations of fighters’.¹² The international community for its part has also contributed to this rhetoric, focusing much of its attention on ‘harmless’ and ‘powerless’ women and children who need to be ‘saved’. For example, one of the ways in which the advocacy group ‘Save Darfur’ has advocated for humanitarian and/or military intervention in Darfur has been through the prominent display of images and stories of the suffering of women with much less emphasis on male victims.¹³ Indeed, as Charli Carpenter highlights, ‘If women can be assumed to be civilians, and are innocent and vulnerable, it is they in particular (along with children, the elderly and the disabled) who must be protected’.¹⁴ Thus conventional thinking seems to imply that the power of men, as the protector of women and children, should not be tarnished by pointing out that they too can be victims of war.

While essentialist paradigms often depict women as helpless and weak in the midst of a conflict, women themselves cope with war by adopting new roles and taking on new responsibilities. This may mean taking direct part in the hostilities as a combatant or leaving the private sphere of the home to find employment to take care of her children. In fact, ‘women’s wartime experiences, so frequently portrayed

10 *Ibid.*

11 For more on the exclusion of women from official negotiation processes, see *Strategies for Policymakers*, Institute for Inclusive Security, No. 2, October 2009, available at: http://www.huntalternatives.org/download/1825_bringing_women_into_peace_negotiations_final_pdf.pdf (last visited 29 October 2009).

12 Adam Jones, ‘Gender and ethnic conflict in ex-Yugoslavia,’ in *Gender Inclusive: Essays on violence, men and feminist international relations*, Adam Jones (ed), Routledge, London and New York, 2009, p. 67.

13 For examples from their campaign, see www.savedarfur.org. For more on the humanitarian implications of this campaign, see Medina Haeri, ‘Saving Darfur: Does Advocacy Help or Hinder Conflict Resolution?’, in *The Fletcher Journal of Human Security: PRAXIS*, Vol. 23, May 2008.

14 Charli Carpenter, *Innocent Women and Children, Gender, Norms and the Protection of Civilians*, Asgate, Burlington, 2006, p. 31.

in terms of victimisation, offer the potential for social transformation’,¹⁵ by challenging the traditional sex-based division of labour. Here again, however, the absence of women from decision-making bodies means that their wartime experiences are rarely credited and their social gains rarely endure into the post-conflict phase. Nevertheless, women’s war-time activities do make clear that women living in conflict situations are not vulnerable *per se* as a matter of their biology. Rather, it is the pre-existing peacetime social inequalities, which are further reinforced by conflict, that result in many of women’s wartime vulnerabilities.

Yet another method of depriving women of a sense of agency is by continually associating them with children – the assumption being that women and children are equally powerless and in need of protection. A search of several humanitarian-related documents shows a pattern in the use of language that persistently equates women with children and the elderly, all of whom are described as being necessarily vulnerable. One example from the 2008 ICRC Annual report posits: ‘As the civilian population becomes increasingly caught up in armed conflicts, specific problems may engender or exacerbate vulnerability among women, children, the elderly or minorities’.¹⁶ Likewise, the 2009–2010 plan of the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), highlights that their ‘humanitarian values programmes [will target] war affected children and their caretakers, youth in school clubs, [and] vulnerable women and children’.¹⁷ Another document, this time from UNICEF, explains that, ‘Human rights violations are widespread and affect every segment of the population: women and children, ethnic, religious, political and regional groups, as well as educated Afghans’.¹⁸ This is only a sample, but it reveals a thread of victimization that closely associates women with children, who, along with the elderly and the disabled are designated as being *de facto* ‘vulnerable’. Yet another example drawn from the Forced Migration Online *Guide to Managing Returns* states: ‘The return process can heighten the vulnerability of groups already at risk of exploitation or marginalisation, such as women, children, the elderly and the disabled’.¹⁹ Interestingly enough, this example uses sex as a separate sociological variable, similar to age, ethnicity and disability. Thus whereas children are made up of boys and girls and the elderly and disabled also include both men and women, women are designated as a stand-alone category to emphasize their vulnerability in accordance with the masculine norm of reference.

15 Sheila Meintjes, Anu Pillay and Meredith Turshen, ‘There is No Aftermath for Women’, in *The Aftermath, Women in Post-Conflict Transformation*, Sheila Meintjes, Anu Pillay and Meredith Turshen (eds), Zed Books, London and New York, 2001, p. 7.

16 *Annual Report 2008*, ICRC, Geneva, 2009, p. 11.

17 International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, *Liberia: Plan 2009–2010*, available at: <http://www.ifrc.org/docs/appeals/annual09/MAALR00109p.pdf> (last visited 28 January 2010).

18 UNICEF, *Afghanistan: UNICEF Humanitarian Appeal for Children and Women, Jan–Dec 2000*, available at: http://www.asylumlaw.org/docs/afghanistan/AFG_1/Sec%20II/UNICEF.pdf (last visited 27 October 2009).

19 Forced Migration Online, *FMO Research Guide – Managing Return*, available at: <http://www.forcedmigration.org/guides/fmo042/fmo042-3.htm> (last visited 27 October 2009).

As can be seen from the examples provided above, language is key to understanding the perpetuation of stereotypes in the way we approach humanitarian assistance today. Charli Carpenter has argued that the continual linguistic association of women with children serves to highlight their reproductive functions to the exclusion of their other non-reproductive related needs: 'Women have traditionally been associated with child-rearing, and the special protections that have accrued to women under international humanitarian law have historically addressed only their specific needs as mothers rather than the vulnerabilities they face as a result of gender hierarchies prevalent in society before and during armed conflict'.²⁰

In this way, essentialist myths that present women as the weaker sex continue to situate women in a subordinate position to men, thus reinforcing the dualism between powerless women and powerful men, i.e. a feminine peace and a masculine war. This conception of women as passive beneficiaries is disempowering as it can result in the exclusion of women from humanitarian efforts. This can mean that women are not consulted about their needs nor included in project planning, which negatively impacts the quality, efficiency, and efficacy of humanitarian assistance. For example, as women are generally responsible for their families' food needs, their input is critical when determining the type and quantity of food to be distributed, as well as determining where to put distribution points so that they are safely and conveniently accessible to women. Not doing so could result in significant gaps in aid delivery, especially among female heads of households who may not have a male family member to speak for them or to collect food rations for their families. In short, the language used to define women determines how they are perceived in the wider context of humanitarian assistance. Thus in order to ensure that women's agency is safeguarded, humanitarian actors need to move away from stale assumptions of vulnerability and recognize the plurality of women's roles during a conflict, including as working mothers, community leaders, peace activists, and combatants.

Taking up arms

One of the most overt ways that women have dispelled the notion that they are intrinsically weak or vulnerable *per se* is through their active participation in hostilities. One of the first countries to contest this notion was the Soviet Union, who mobilized hundreds of thousands of women for combat duty as a result of a manpower shortage in World War II. Although accurate tallies are difficult to come by, official figures state that the Soviet Union recruited about 800,000 women into the Red Army and another 200,000 in the irregular forces. Many of these women (about 250,000) received military training and a reported 500,000 served on the front lines, usually in medical services and anti-aircraft units.²¹

20 C. Carpenter, above note 14, p. 99.

21 J. Goldstein, above note 1, pp. 64–65.

Although the above figures may well have been exaggerated, 'the Soviet case underscores the lesson ... that women can be organized into effective large-scale military units'.²²

Presently, women still make up only a small percentage of military personnel, although their numbers are growing. In the United States, for example, women account for around 15% of those serving in active duty.²³ In Iraq, where more American women have fought and died than in all wars since World War II, one in ten troops is a woman.²⁴ In fact, recent reports have shown that despite the official prohibition against American female soldiers joining military combat branches, the situation on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan has been that 'women have done nearly as much in battle as their male counterparts: patrolled streets with machine guns, served as gunners on vehicles, disposed of explosives, and driven trucks down bomb-ridden roads'.²⁵ This has led many to re-evaluate the official position of the US military *vis a vis* women, and to wonder whether the US should follow the lead of over a dozen countries who allow women in some or all ground combat occupations.²⁶

Women have been particularly active in non-State armed groups who 'often provide a greater degree of ideological and practical space for women to participate as combatants than do institutionalized state or pro-state nationalisms'.²⁷ In Nepal, for example, women reportedly make up about one-third of the Maoist fighting forces.²⁸ Likewise, it has been widely noted that women have been pivotally involved as combatants in the Tamil armed groups, particularly the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, where estimates put their numbers from around 15% to one-third of the organization's core combat strength.²⁹ Women were also an important contingent of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) during the first and second Sudanese civil wars³⁰ and estimates put women at between 10 and 30% of the fighting forces in the Sierra Leone conflict.³¹ Although it is true that women associated with non-State armed

22 *Ibid.*, p. 70.

23 *Statistics on Women in the Military*, Women in Military Service For America Memorial Foundation, Inc., available at: <http://www.womensmemorial.org/PDFs/StatsonWIM.pdf> (last visited 1 October 2009).

24 Helen Benedict, 'The Plight of Women Soldiers,' in *The Nation*, 5 May 2009, available at: <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20090518/benedict> (last visited 30 September 2009).

25 Lizette Alvarez, 'Women at Arms: G.I. Jane Breaks the Combat Barrier,' in *The New York Times*, 16 August 2009, available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/16/us/16women.html?_r=1 (last visited 30 September 2009).

26 *Ibid.*

27 Miranda Alison, 'Women as Agents of Political Violence: Gendering Security,' in *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 35, No. 4, December 2004, p. 448.

28 James Fontanella-Khan, 'Women fighters in Nepal,' in *Financial Times*, 26 September 2009, available at: http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/57c05a1a-a719-11de-bd14-00144feabdc0,dwp_uuid=a712eb94-dc2b-11da-890d-0000779e2340.html (last visited 30 October 2009).

29 M. Alison, above note 27, p. 450.

30 'No standing, few prospects: how peace is failing South Sudanese female combatants and WAAFG', in *Small Army Survey Sudan Issue Brief*, No. 13, September 2008, p. 1.

31 Dyan Mazurana and Kristopher Carlson, *From Combat to Community: women and girls of Sierra Leone*, Women Waging Peace Policy Commission, Washington DC, 2004, p. 6.

groups often have non-combat roles such as food producers, porters, and health care providers, they often perform these tasks in addition to front-line combat functions. For example, one study on women associated with armed groups in Sierra Leone reported that almost half (44%) of the women interviewed reported having received basic military and weapons training.³²

A prominent example of women taking an active role in the perpetuation of atrocities is the participation of women in the Rwandan genocide. Far from being passive victims, women from all walks of life including peasants and members of the educated class such as teachers, nurses, journalists, and even nuns played a key role in sustaining the conflict and demonstrated their potential for inflicting extraordinary cruelty.³³ Women participated directly in the killings and some even organized and led attacks in which hundreds of people lost their lives.³⁴ Scores of other women identified the people to be killed, wielding machetes and nail studded clubs as they cheered on the genocide by gathering around churches, hospitals, and other places of refuge – in fact, there is no evidence that women were any more likely to provide refuge to those being hunted than men.³⁵ Of course, it bears mentioning that men (particularly those who were young and poor) were the main targets of systematic government mobilization efforts and as such, they were the main initiators and implementers of the genocide.³⁶ However, the number of women who were active in the killings and who have since been convicted of participating in the atrocities clearly demonstrates that women are neither intrinsically innocent nor helpless and indeed, ‘that when women are provided with positive and negative incentives similar to those of men, their degree of participation in genocide, and the violence and cruelty they exhibit, will run closely parallel to their male counterparts’.³⁷

Even as they dispel notions of female helplessness by taking up arms, female combatants confront their own set of challenges, including the risk of sexual abuse or harassment. Additionally, female combatants may be overlooked in disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) processes and may struggle with issues of stigma or rejection from their families or communities when returning from the battlefield. It is likewise important to recognize that women who take part in hostilities no longer enjoy the protection against attacks that international humanitarian law affords to civilians. They must therefore comply with the laws of war by respecting and refraining from attacking those who are not, or are no longer, directly participating in hostilities. Each conflict needs to be

32 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

33 *Rwanda – Not so Innocent: When Women Become Killers*, Africa Rights, London, 1995, pp. 1–3.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

36 For more on the gendered aspects of the genocide particularly with regard to male and female perpetrators and victims, see Adam Jones, ‘Gender and genocide in Rwanda’, in *Gender Inclusive: essays on violence, men and feminist international relations*, Adam Jones (ed.), Routledge, London and New York, 2009, pp. 196–229.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 221.

examined individually in order to understand the various roles adopted by men and women, as well as the impact of the conflict on fighters and civilians alike.

Coping with the ravages of war

‘My whole life changed when my husband was killed during the events of 2004. He was returning home after work, when fighting broke out between armed groups and coalition forces. A stray bullet killed him instantly (...) Suddenly, everything became my responsibility. I felt lost. I had no support, and I did not know how to face the outside world alone.’

*Um Mohammed, 41, Falluja, Iraq*³⁸

Um’s story is emblematic of millions of women around the world whose lives have been upended by war and who find themselves alone and with the burden of ensuring the day-to-day survival of their families. Many of these women face considerable challenges and are made vulnerable by the circumstances in which they find themselves, notably their proximity to the fighting. Modern warfare has increasingly moved away from clearly delineated battlefields as more conflicts are now being fought internally between rival ethnic, religious, or political groups over the control of resources, territories or civilian populations.³⁹ Whether the violence is internal or cross-border, more and more civilians are too often placed at the epicentre of conflict, directly targeted or endangered by their proximity to the fighting. Seeing that women and girls comprise a significant proportion of the civilians living in war-torn areas, they are therefore faced with significant risks and threats to their physical, psychological, and social well-being. At the same time, women show remarkable strength in coping with the challenges of living in war and often adopt new roles and responsibilities to care for their families and take part in community life.

Far from home

For millions of people all over the world,⁴⁰ the brutality of war has meant being uprooted from their homes and livelihoods, fleeing the violence in their communities that threatens the well-being of their families. Displacement may occur in response to an actual attack or specific event, but it may also take place in anticipation or fear of an attack or possible abuse. Women may be forced to flee with their children because their husbands are fighting in the conflict, have been wounded or detained, or have gone into hiding to avoid being conscripted by the

38 *Women and War Iraq Newsletter*, ICRC, March 2009, p. 4.

39 For more on the advent of so-called new wars, see Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2006.

40 UNHCR estimates that there were 42 million forcibly displaced people worldwide at the end of 2008. This includes 15.2 million refugees, 827,000 asylum-seekers (pending cases) and 26 million internally displaced persons (IDPs). *2008 Global Trends: Refugees, Asylum-Seekers, Returnees, Internally Displaced and Stateless Persons*, UNHCR, 16 June 2009.

armed groups. Likewise, the panic and chaos surrounding displacement may result in the separation of families, which also means that women have to manage alone and assume extra responsibilities. In cultures where women are not permitted to travel unless accompanied by a male family member, this separation can restrict women's ability to flee from the hostilities. Alternatively, some women may lack the necessary personal documentation to cross checkpoints or international borders, or even the funds required to pay for transport. In short, the needs and specific vulnerabilities of displaced women are highly dependent on local cultural and social factors, as well as their different patterns of displacement.

Populations forced to uproot themselves often congregate in camps, which can present a new set of risks and burdens for women. The absence of their menfolk may require women to shoulder all the daily responsibilities for ensuring their own and their families' survival. This is particularly onerous for female heads of household, widows, elderly women, and pregnant women. Whereas these women might have relied on familial and kinship networks for food and resource sharing, their separation from their families and communities deprives them of this support. Consequently, displaced women often have to travel long distances in search of necessities such as water, food, and firewood – an activity that frequently leaves them at risk of exposure to hostilities, mines, and sexual violence. In Gereida camp in South Darfur, for example, women comprise a large number of the victims being attacked on the outskirts of town because they are the ones who most often leave the relative safety of the camp to collect firewood and grass, in order to meet the material and economic needs of their families. The risk factors in this area are such that men are more likely to be killed in an attack, whereas women face the risk of sexual violence. In response to these risk factors, the ICRC introduced fuel-efficient stoves as a protection mechanism to minimize the time that women are obliged to spend outside of the camp.

Access to information and the right to meaningfully influence decisions made on their behalf are critical elements in protecting the dignity of those affected by displacement. However, owing to cultural practices, established administrative procedures and other practices which tend to grant such rights somewhat reflexively to males in a society, there are many factors that make it exceptionally difficult for women to claim such entitlements when struggling with the circumstances of displacement. Experience has shown time and again that when women are asked for input directly, the perspective and priorities they give differ from those put forth by the men who purport to speak on their behalf. Indeed, this is the case in Casamance, Senegal, where the role women are accorded in the local culture permits them to attend and speak at community meetings. At these meetings, the ICRC ensures that women have an opportunity to make their voices heard, and has found that their insight serves to strengthen our ability to respond to the needs of the whole population.⁴¹

41 Martin Gauthier, *Women and War: A case study on the integrated approach used in Casamance*, ICRC, July 2009, p. 6.

Displacement can also compromise women’s ability to access quality health care. For example, even if women normally have access to good health care services, they may be forced to flee, depriving them of access to contraception and hence leading to a higher incidence of pregnancy and a greater need for reproductive health services. Refugee and IDP camps may also be a source of health problems for women. A lack of privacy may prevent women from making use of available sanitary facilities, which can, as has commonly been the case in Pakistan, result in serious problems such as bladder infections or urinary incontinence. Sanitary facilities with insufficient safety provisions can also increase the risk of sexual violence.

Even where the population is not forced to flee, war can overwhelm health care systems, leading to severe shortages of medical supplies and staff. Health infrastructure may be destroyed and health personnel may flee the violence even as others in the community stay put. Thus safe access to adequate health care may pose a significant hardship for many women living in a conflict zone as it creates a double problem – just as they may have a greater need for health care, they often have to travel greater distances and spend more money to receive an adequate level of care. Pregnant and nursing women are at particular risk during conflict because they often face life-threatening emergencies that require immediate medical assistance. In fact, among the ten countries with the highest risk of maternal death, most are at war today or are in a post-conflict situation, including Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, Chad, Angola, Liberia, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.⁴²

Notwithstanding the above challenges, it is important to recognize that women play a vital role in maintaining the health and welfare of their family and community. Their role in preventing and managing sickness and disease becomes paramount when access to health care is limited. For example, women may assist with deliveries in their communities when trained medical personnel are too far away to attend the birth. In fact, traditional birth attendants may represent the only access to reproductive health care for many women and their newborn children. Thus in some contexts such as Liberia and Senegal where skilled health workers and midwives are in short supply, the ICRC has provided training to traditional birth attendants to improve their skills. This training better prepares them to assist with normal deliveries, and importantly, trains them to recognize when to send women with complications to the nearest health centre.

The long wait for news

International humanitarian law recognizes the importance of families being able to know the fate of a missing relative.⁴³ Since the vast majority of those who disappear

42 Cassie Landers, *Maternal and Newborn Health: A Global Challenge*, US Fund for UNICEF Youth Report 2009, p. 9, available at: http://youth.unicefusa.org/assets/pdf/0027-unicef-youthreport09-8_4.pdf (last visited 24 September 2009).

43 See Article 32, Additional Protocol I.

or are killed are men, the burden and pain of ascertaining their fate most often falls to their female relatives. Waiting for news of their loved one day after day can have serious emotional consequences for the wives, mothers, and daughters of the missing. Not knowing if they are alive or dead means that families are in limbo, unable to mourn the death of their loved one and unable to give up the often fruitless search that may take years and deplete entire life savings. Although states have an obligation to take the necessary measures to establish the fate of missing persons and inform their families, all too often the parties to an armed conflict do not do enough, for instance failing to exhume gravesites to identify mortal remains. An example of this long-term anguish is the Iran–Iraq war, where twenty years after the end of the conflict, tens of thousands of Iraqi and Iranian members of the armed forces remain unaccounted for. Thus countless families in both countries continue to search for any information at all about what happened to their relatives – doing the rounds of hospitals, police stations, morgues, institutes of forensic medicine, and humanitarian organizations. With the prevailing insecurity in Iraq, these efforts often entail considerable risks.⁴⁴

In addition to the considerable emotional strain of a missing relative, there are also serious economic and legal consequences for the women left behind, particularly in contexts where women have few educational or professional opportunities owing to their low social status. In Nepal, for example, 90% of the missing are males, 81% of whom are married, and 71% of whom went missing between 18 and 35 years of age. Thus many families have been deprived of their primary breadwinner, and women, who often have young children to support, face numerous social and economic problems.⁴⁵ ‘As women have no opportunities to work and earn money, they are unable to make an economic contribution to the household. As a result, they are perceived as bringing in nothing to the family, but simply being another mouth to feed’.⁴⁶ This perception further adds to the stigma that many women face both within their family and their community. In response to these needs, the ICRC, in partnership with the Nepal Red Crescent Society, started an initiative to provide female-headed households an in-kind grant to serve as start-up capital. These grants could be used to fund livestock, small-scale farming, trade or vocational training.⁴⁷

The legal status of women with missing male relatives (particularly husbands) is often unclear as they are no longer considered wives, but are not yet officially classified as widows. This may affect their ability to inherit, seek custody of their children, access property, or even remarry, especially as some countries

44 *Twenty years after the end of the Iran–Iraq war, tens of thousands of combatants still unaccounted for*, ICRC, 16 October 2008, available at: <http://www.icrc.org/Web/Eng/siteeng0.nsf/html/iran-iraq-missing-161008> (last visited 26 September 2009).

45 Meen Bhawan and Naya Baneshwor, *Families of missing persons in Nepal: a study of their needs*, ICRC, April 2009, p. 12.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

47 Moheindu Chemjong and Govinda Dahal, ‘Deepa, Pushpa, Sita and Maiy’, in *The Nepali Times*, 7 March 2008, available at: <http://www.nepalitimes.com.np/issue/390/Womenday/14553> (last visited 20 October 2009).

allow many years to pass before officially declaring a person dead or absent. Furthermore, not having the official status of a widow may prevent women from accessing government assistance programmes. This is the case in Iraq, where access to social services for assistance in female-headed households is limited to widows whose husband’s death was linked to a situation of violence. Other forms of assistance are likewise unattainable for women with missing husbands because of complicated administrative processes. Numerous documents are required which may not be readily available to women who have often lost their homes and their husbands.

Despite these numerous obstacles, however, women have proven incredibly resourceful at exploiting available resources and finding food and shelter for their children and dependents. They have organized themselves in associations and have continued to challenge authorities to provide them with information. One example of this determination is the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, who spent many years organizing marches to demand answers from the Argentine government as to the fate of their missing children.⁴⁸

A violation unlike any other

‘It has probably become more dangerous to be a woman than a soldier in an armed conflict.’

*Major General Patrick Cammaert, former commander of UN peacekeeping forces in the eastern Congo*⁴⁹

Speaking of the high prevalence of sexual violence against women and girls in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the above statement is provocative, yet telling of the fact that sexual violence against women and girls is among the most traumatic and most common abuses of war. Statistics are notoriously difficult to amass and rarely reflective of the reality on the ground – given the stigma associated with being a victim of sexual violence, women are generally reluctant to come forward and admit to being a victim of rape. However, time and again, history shows the gruesome correlation between armed conflict and rape, forced prostitution, sexual slavery, and other abuses against women and girls (and to a lesser extent, men and boys).⁵⁰ In fact, sexual violence has long been such a common feature of warfare that it was generally considered an inevitable consequence of war,⁵¹ as women and their bodies were often equated with the spoils of war.

It was not until the atrocities committed during the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda came to light that sexual violence gained international

48 For more information on this movement, see Marguerite Guzman Bouvard, ‘Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo’, in *Scholarly Resources*, Oxford, 1994.

49 *Rape: Weapon of War*, OHCHR News Item, June 2008, available at: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/RapeWeaponWar.aspx> (last visited 22 October 2009).

50 For a historical analysis of sexual violence in armed conflict, see Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, Fawcett Books, New York, 1975.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

recognition as a war crime and its inevitability was increasingly called into question. This was due in large part to the sheer scale of sexual violence during those two conflicts – further proof of the changing nature of warfare that puts women and girls at increasing risk of bodily and psychological harm. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, estimates of the total number of women subjected to sexual violence are between 20,000 and 50,000.⁵² In Rwanda, the lack of accurate data is even more jarring, where the range is from 15,700 to 500,000,⁵³ with most experts estimating the number to be closer to 250,000.⁵⁴ While the figures are no doubt staggering, it was also the ways in which these atrocities were carried out that catapulted these issues to the forefront of humanitarian debate. For example, Bosnian women and girls were routinely assaulted in the presence of family members or in public, as part of a systematic strategy of ethnic cleansing. Women were forcibly impregnated, i.e. raped until they became pregnant, and held in so-called ‘rape camps’ until the pregnancy was too advanced to be terminated.⁵⁵ The Rwanda genocide in 1994 provided a horrific example of sexual violence forming an integral part of an ethnic cleansing strategy, whereby Tutsi women were primarily targeted because of both their gender and their ethnicity.⁵⁶ Forms of sexual violence included rape, sexual slavery, forced incest, deliberate HIV transmission, forced impregnation, and genital mutilation.⁵⁷ These atrocities were so widespread in fact that René Degni-Ségui, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Rwanda, has stated that: ‘[r]ape was systemic and was used as a “weapon” by the perpetrators of the massacres ... [and a]ccording to consistent and reliable testimony, ... rape was the rule and its absence was the exception’.⁵⁸

The evolution of international humanitarian law regarding sexual violence in armed conflict has closely mirrored prevailing social attitudes over the last six decades. In fact, sexual violence is expressly referred to only in a limited manner in the 1949 Geneva Conventions. Article 147 of the Fourth Geneva Convention refers to ‘wilfully causing great suffering or serious injury to body or health’, which would

52 *Women in Transition, The MONEE Project CEE/CIS/Baltics Regional Monitoring Report No 6*, UNICEF International Child Development Centre, Florence, 1999, p. 86.

53 Jeanne Ward, ‘Sexual violence against women and girls in conflict’, in *The Shame of War: sexual violence against women and girls in conflict*, OCHA/Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), 2007, p. 12.

54 Pamela Shipman and Lauren Rumble, ‘Neglected challenges: the humanitarian responsibility to protect’, in *The Shame of War: sexual violence against women and girls in conflict*, OCHA/Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), 2007, p. 115.

55 Megan Bastick, Karin Grimm, Rahel Kunz, *Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict: A Global Overview and Implications for the Security Sector*, Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, Geneva, 2007, p. 117.

56 Binaifer Nowrojee, ‘Shattered Lives: Sexual Violence during the Rwandan Genocide and its Aftermath’, in *Human Rights Watch*, New York, 1996, p. 13.

57 ‘Marked for Death’, *Rape Survivors Living with HIV/AIDS in Rwanda*, Amnesty International, 5 April 2004, p. 2, available at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AFR47/007/2004> (last visited 23 October 2009).

58 United Nations, Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Rwanda submitted by René Degni-Ségui, Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights, under paragraph 20 of resolution S-3/1 of 25 May 1994, (E/CN.4/1996/68), 29 January 1996, para. 16.

certainly include acts of rape, even though it is not directly mentioned. Rape is only directly mentioned in Article 27 of the Fourth Geneva Convention which states that ‘women shall be especially protected against any attack on their honour, in particular against rape, enforced prostitution, or any form of indecent assault’. Although it is important that this article emphasizes the obligation of parties to a conflict to prevent sexual violence against women, the reference to an attack upon a woman’s ‘honour’ reinforces the notion of rape as a social stigma rather than an attack against a woman’s physical and psychological well-being. This association reflects the point of view of the men who formulated the Geneva Conventions sixty years ago, for whom a woman’s virtue was of paramount concern. This perception of women endures in numerous cultures around the world and results in the stigmatization and rejection of many victims of sexual violence.⁵⁹

More recent treaties starting with the 1977 Additional Protocols deliberately drop the connection between sexual violence and honour, i.e. Articles 75 and 76 of the Additional Protocol I prohibit ‘outrages against personal dignity, in particular ... any form of indecent assault’, and establish that ‘women should be the subject of special respect and shall be protected in particular against rape, enforced prostitution and any other form of indecent assault’. Of particular note are the judgements of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), which have confirmed that sexual violence is covered by the rules relating to torture and inhuman and degrading treatment.⁶⁰ The statutes of the ICTY and the ICTR, as well as the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) also consider that rape may constitute a crime against humanity.⁶¹ In 2000, the United Nations Security Council also highlighted the issue of sexual violence in armed conflict as a threat against international peace and security when it passed Resolution 1325 calling for all parties to protect women and girls from sexual violence.⁶² The Council revisited the issue in 2008 with

59 For more on a discussion of honour within International Humanitarian Law, see *ICRC frame of reference on sexual violence in armed conflict and other situations of violence*, ICRC, March 2009, p. 12.

60 In *Prosecutor v. Zejnil Delalic et al.*, the ICTY stated: ‘There can be no doubt that rape and other forms of sexual assault are expressly prohibited under international humanitarian law’. It considered ‘rape to constitute a physical invasion of a sexual nature, committed on a person under circumstances that are coercive’. It therefore found that whenever rape and other forms of sexual violence meet the criteria for torture, they constitute torture, in the same manner as any other acts that meet these criteria (ICTY, *Prosecutor v. Zejnil Delalic et al.*, Case No. IT-96-21-T, judgement of 16 November 1998, paras 476, 478 and 496). In *Prosecutor v. Furundzija*, the ICTY Appeal Chamber stated: ‘With regard to the issue of the reaffirmation by the International Tribunal of rape as a war crime, the Appeals Chamber finds that the international community has long recognized rape as a war crime. In the *Celebici Judgement*, one of the accused was convicted of torture by means of rape, as a violation of the laws or customs of war. This recognition by the international community of rape as a war crime is also reflected in the Rome Statute where it is designated as a war crime’ (ICTY, *Prosecutor v. Anto Furundzija* (appeal), Case No. IT-95-17/1-A, judgement of 21 July 2000, para. 210).

61 ICTY Statute, Art. 5.g; ICTR Statute, Art. 3.g; Rome Statute, Art. 7.1.g.

62 Security Council Resolution 1325 was passed unanimously on 31 October 2000 and was the first resolution ever passed by the Security Council that specifically addresses the impact of war on women, and highlights women’s contributions to conflict resolution and sustainable peace. With regard to sexual violence, it specifically called ‘on all parties to armed conflict to take special measures to protect women

SC1820⁶³ and again in 2009 with SC 1888 and 1889,⁶⁴ which expressly condemn the continuation of sexual violence as a tactic of war and call for its cessation by all parties to a conflict. In short, there exists a robust and comprehensive body of law that makes clear the express and absolute prohibition of sexual violence in armed conflict. The challenge therefore lies in ensuring the implementation of, and respect for, these rules.

Notwithstanding its explicit prohibition in international humanitarian law, sexual violence continues to be an ugly component of many conflicts all over the world. As seen from the previous examples, sexual violence may be used by armed forces to punish, shame, intimidate, or simply to destroy the fabric of a community. Often, the women themselves are not even the main targets of the attack. Rather, arms bearers violate women as a means of demoralizing the men who could not protect 'their' women. This is particularly the case when a family 'honour' is bound up in the 'virtue' of women; thus rape can be used as a deliberate tactic to destabilize whole families and communities. When sexual violence is thus used, it is often referred to as a method of warfare. Preventing sexual violence from taking place is an ongoing challenge and the ICRC takes every opportunity to inform the authorities and armed groups of their obligations under international humanitarian law. When violations are committed, including crimes of sexual violence, the ICRC reports these to the authorities concerned.

Whether they are assaulted as a deliberate military strategy or individually targeted, the consequences for victims of sexual violence are at once severe and long-lasting, sometimes enduring for an entire lifetime. Rape can have painful physical consequences on a woman's health, ranging from vaginal tearing, infertility or incontinence to sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS.

and girls from gender-based violence, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse, and all other forms of violence in situations of armed conflict.' For more, see *The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom*, <http://www.peacewomen.org/un/sc/1325.html> (last visited 28 January 2010).

63 On 19 June 2008, the Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 1820, which noted that 'rape and other forms of sexual violence can constitute war crimes, crimes against humanity or a constitutive act with respect to genocide'. The resolution also affirmed the council's intention when establishing and renewing 'state specific' sanction regimes to consider imposing 'targeted and graduated' measures against warring factions who committed rape and other forms of violence against women and girls. For more on this resolution, see *Stop Rape Now: UN Action Against Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict*, <http://www.stopraperow.org/pdf/Security%20Council%20Resolution%201820.pdf> (last visited 28 January 2010).

64 As a follow-up to Resolution 1820, on 30 September 2009, the Security Council once again unanimously adopted resolution 1888, calling for the appointment of a Special Representative to the Secretary-General to provide coherent and strategic leadership to address sexual violence in armed conflict. To commemorate the anniversary of Resolution 1325, the Security Council adopted Resolution 1889, urging Member States, United Nations bodies, donors and civil society to ensure that women's protection and empowerment was taken into account during post-conflict needs assessment and planning, and factored into subsequent funding and programming. It also called on all those involved in the planning for disarmament, demobilization and integration programmes, in particular, to take into account the needs of women and girls associated with armed groups, as well as the needs of their children. For more on these resolutions, see The United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service (UN-NGLS), <http://www.un-ngls.org/spip.php?article1633> (last visited 28 January 2010).

Unwanted pregnancy is yet another common occurrence, whereby the child serves as a constant reminder of the trauma endured by her mother. While women have been known to reject children born of rape, many women look beyond the horror of the conception and accept and love the child as their own. The children too suffer from severe stigmatization – in Bosnia and Rwanda, for example, children born of rape were often labelled as 'children of hate'.⁶⁵ As agonizing as the physical injuries may be, the psychological trauma of sexual violence can take much longer to heal. Victims are often confronted with feelings of shame, fear, and humiliation. They may find it difficult to return to their previous lives and if the woman in question is the breadwinner of her family, the well-being of the entire family may be jeopardized. Rape is rarely addressed openly by victims who fear being stigmatized or rejected by their husbands, families, and communities. Thus many victims of sexual violence never receive any assistance to help with their recovery – in fact, it is extremely difficult for humanitarian workers to identify or access victims for fear of singling them out and adding to the burdens by labelling them as victims of rape. The stigma of rape is also what makes rape in conflict settings so difficult to quantify.

In the North and South Kivu region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, alarming numbers of women and girls have been subjected to sexual violence, particularly rape. Successive waves of fighting, the resultant displacement, and the prevailing climate of impunity have resulted in massive human rights violations perpetrated by weapons bearers and civilians alike. As in many other contexts, victims of sexual violence in the DRC are reluctant to come forward for fear of being blamed and ostracized by their families and communities. The ICRC programme of support for victims of sexual violence considers the various levels of the impact and causality of sexual violence and as such, covers medical, psychological, social and economic issues. The most innovative of its responses are the establishment of ICRC-supported counselling centres called 'Maisons d'Ecoute' (listening houses). These serve as places where victims of sexual violence or other traumatic situations can meet with a local psychosocial assistant trained by the ICRC. These counselling centres provide victims with an opportunity to talk about their trauma, define their needs, and find possible ways of improving their situation. They also offer referral services for possible medical or legal needs. Importantly, the counsellors may also mediate between the victim and her family to reduce the risk of stigma or rejection. In addition to serving as an important source of support, the counselling centres also highlight women's resilience and ability to cope with the worst kind of violation. These individual services are supplemented by community-wide sensitization efforts that emphasize the need to support rather than reject victims of sexual violence.

65 For more on the human rights and specific vulnerabilities of children born of wartime rape, see Charli Carpenter (ed.), *Born of War: Protecting Children of Sexual Violence Survivors in Conflict Zones*, Kumarian Press, Bloomfield, 2007.

Conclusion

The central premise of this article has been to move away from stereotypical depictions of women in war towards a better understanding of the plurality of roles, responsibilities and challenges that shape the way women experience armed conflict. For example, as discussed earlier, women in the Rwandan genocide both perpetrated violence on a par with their male counterparts and experienced unimaginable suffering in the form of sexual violence and abuse. Women were not helpless or violent *per se* – rather, their experiences were a product of historical, political and cultural factors. In fact, culture has been one of the most important transversal themes permeating the above discussion, as it directly influences the gender relations, i.e. the socially ascribed roles, responsibilities, opportunities, and limitations for males and females, that exist in any society. Understanding these dynamics often determines the humanitarian approach the ICRC takes, the materials it uses, and the staff it employs. For example, cultural considerations can restrict the presence of beneficiary women in public places, which in turn can make it difficult for the ICRC to consult women on their specific humanitarian needs and concerns. These restrictions often highlight the need for female staff, interpreters and health workers who can have direct access to the female population. This in turn may require some creative thinking, such as providing training to women who may lack the technical expertise but have the language abilities and personal motivation needed for these positions. It may also require accommodating male family members who accompany female staff to the field in order to conform to cultural conventions.

This article began with a discussion of images of women from the First World War – images that discounted the contributions that women were making on the front lines of the conflict and which relegated women to being pretty nursemaids and nurturing mothers whose primary roles were away from the battlefield. The changing nature of conflict has meant that women have been moving closer and closer to the fighting – as humanitarian workers, combatants or civilians. Like the nurses from World War I whose agency was overlooked in favour of tired stereotypes, the language that is used by many humanitarian actors to describe women's wartime experiences continues to paint them as a homogenous group, who along with children and the elderly, constitute the most vulnerable and helpless victims of conflict. The reality, of course, is that women routinely display remarkable courage and resilience in coping with the very serious challenges that upend their lives, and recent images of women affected by war plainly tell this story. Indeed, the ICRC archives are filled with photographs that show women coping with the trauma of war – leading their lives with dignity and courage. These images show women from all over the world taking care of their children and serving as anchors for their families. They show women reaching out to each other and finding strength and resilience together. There are photos of women ploughing

gardens, building houses, and starting their own small businesses. Taken together, these photos represent an updated vision of women and war – one which acknowledges the specific challenges and vulnerabilities that confront women living in armed conflict, but which also highlights their agency and their capacity to confront and surmount the brutalities of war.