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Everybody Reads
Research Brief
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Rape as a Weapon of War

“In war, rape can be a one-time event or it can happen many times or it can be one time with a number of people in various ways” said psychologist Adeyinka Akinsulure-Smith. Rape is an ugly word that doesn’t fully encompass the multiplicity of its layers. It is one of the most traumatic experiences that a person can have and war time rapes only serve to deepen their complexity.

Rape is not about sex but about power and domination. In times of war, it is used to conquer, divide and drastically alter the genetic make up or ethnic integrity of a region. Rape as a weapon targets women and girls with the sole purpose of manipulating and subordinating communities and regions. These attacks are not only horrific in their physical violation but also for the mental and emotional scars that they leave behind. Many women sustained their trauma at the hands of males who were both known and unknown to them. While there is plenty of information available focusing on the crimes against humanity, many of the survivors are hesitant to publicly speak regarding abused that they’ve suffered. Cultural norms stigmatize these women, further marginalizing them and creating a fringe group within their communities.

Unfortunately, there are few resources to deal with either aspect so many of the women do what is possible to survive and take care of their children. In many cases, the victims are children themselves. One of the elements that determine the severity of trauma that the victims experience is the cultural norms regarding rape. In some cultures, rape victims are seen as tarnished and viewed as a shameful reflection upon their families. In these particular cultures, the women are shunned and their reintegration into society is difficult if not prohibited. The victims are forced to face their traumas alone, without the normal support systems that they might have for other types of crimes perpetuated against them. Due to their isolation and lack of resources, a cycle of poverty is enacted. Children who are malnourished under perform in school and other cognitive learning programs. Since education is a common means for escaping poverty, the children of these victims are trapped within their marginalization. As a result of this cycle, the survivors also remain vulnerable to additional exploitations.

According to an article in the Harvard Human Rights Journal, “Throughout the decade of conflict, most journalists and international observers paid little or no attention (and subsequently failed to publicize) the widespread and ongoing attacks directed against women and girls. Sexual violence was Sierra Leone’s invisible war crime”. There have been multiple testimonies from women who were raped immediately upon the arrival of the rebels to their villages. It was extremely common for women to be raped by numerous men and boys. In many instances, the rebels would force family members to rape other family members or kill them immediately. Other times, the rebels would force women and young girls to be their “wives” and bear their children. As a result of the systematic and wide spread use of rape as a weapon of war, the HIV/AIDS in Sierra Leone has grown exponentially, adding to the myriad of issues that many survivors and refugees are forced to contend with. According to Doctors Without Borders – Ottawa program officer Christine Nadori, “Some of the forces in Africa are 80% HIV positive”.

Since the war ended, it has come to light that the RUF (Revolutionary United Front) – the rebels and AFRC (Armed Forces Revolutionary Council) perpetuated these atrocities with equal measure across the country. There have also been several recent studies investigating sexual abuse and violence in refugee camps. According to a 2002 UN report, the most frequently cited perpetrators have been “agency workers from international and local NGO (non governmental organizations) as well as other UN agencies. The most common occurrences are the trading of sex for food and/or supplies. The agency workers are exploiting young girls, generally between the ages of 13-15, for the very supplies and services that the workers were sent to these regions to provide. Some of the reasons given for the creation of a climate conducive to these types of exploitations are: poverty (lack of opportunities to earn a living wage), insufficient food rations and/or supplies, pressure from peers and parents (sometimes sex is the only thing that can be traded for necessary supplies), and reduced educational opportunities. Programs and safeguards are currently being developed to reduce and prevent these exploitations.

Please visit some the following links for more information:

www.law.harvard.edu/students/orgs/hrj/jss18/now_roejee.shtml

<http://www.iht.com/articles/2006/12/01/news/africa.php>

www.sit-edu-geneva.ch/sexual_violence_as_weapon_of_war.htm

www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/2146/context/cover

news.amnesty.org

www.global.wisc.edu/reconciliation/

<http://mediaglobal.org/index.php/2007/07/06/bold-women%e2%80%99s-rights-legislation-in-sierra-leone-puts-women%e2%80%99s-votes-in-the-spotlight/>

<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2006/78756.htm>

<http://jurist.law.pitt.edu/forumy/2007/06/justice-for-freetown-sierra-leone-war.php>

http://iwpr.net/?p=tri&s=f&o=328311&apc_state=henh

<http://www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/afrec/vol18no4/184sierraleone.htm>

<http://news.amnesty.org/index/ENGAFR510032007>