



Women in War and Crisis Zones

Based on Working Paper No.21: Victoria Brittain, 'Women in War and Crisis Zones – one key to Africa's Wars of Underdevelopment'. This is intended to provide a summary of the principal findings, and an indication of the implications these may have for debates over policy.

The paper draws on research in war and post-war situations in Africa, Asia, the Balkans, Colombia and Palestine to illustrate how modern wars have a disproportionate impact on women in patterns common to all continents. It underlines findings by many international organisations about the key role women could play in peace-building or reconciliation, but argues that this will not be possible without new imaginative interventions in areas such as justice and psycho-social health, and without a shift in gender power relations in many areas.

- **The circle of reinforcing negative factors**

The common experience of women can be summed up in a circle of five linked negative factors creating a downward spiral in their lives. The five elements are: displacement; psycho-social health and HIV/Aids; economic impoverishment; the destruction of education, sexual violence.

- **Rape as a war crime**

It was not until after the Bosnia war that the international community accepted the notion of rape as a war crime, partly no doubt because the women concerned were white, European, nearby, and easily attracted major western media attention. The political imperative of demonising Serbia was also part of the impetus that got these crimes onto a mainstream agenda. This was in marked contrast to the attention paid to earlier similar outrages, for instance by the Japanese in World War 2, or, in the contemporary period, the Rwanda genocide's sexual crimes in 1994. Rape as a weapon of war has become one of the hallmarks of the current period.

- **Power relations**

Despite some evident changes in gender relations during wars, with some women empowered by the emergency situation both within their family situation and in the public sphere, this empowerment rarely lasts into the new phase of normalisation and peace-making. Many of the positive changes for women take place under pressure from the international community, but new ways need to be found to make those changes durable. There are too many examples of the technical approach of putting a handful of women into a peace process, or a reconstruction programme, and expecting change to happen automatically. The examples of Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Afghanistan point to the need for interventions that are more than the window-dressing that leaves women disillusioned and disempowered.

- **Wars of Underdevelopment**

The paper examines the different style and impact of today's wars in contrast with both the major wars of the 20th century and the liberation wars of Africa's post-colonial period. It argues that the current long-running wars in Africa can be best understood as wars of underdevelopment, rather than using formulas such as "greed and grievance", or seeing them as resource wars for oil, diamonds and so on. Using the same idea as Professor Amartya Sen on famine, the paper argues that this kind of extremely brutal war, often targeting women, could not exist in countries where there was an educated population.

- **Education**

In a situation where norms of behaviour have broken down under the pressure of war, and large numbers of children have been abandoned or become separated from their families, emergency education programmes will be necessary to break the cycle that will otherwise draw the next generation into a similar fate. The education of women, as well as of children, is essential to enable a viable economic future for their families.

- **Psycho-social and HIV/Aids interventions:**

Ambitious programmes of psycho-social intervention on a very big scale are an essential aspect of publicly recognising what has happened to women, and allowing them to recover enough to play key roles in rehabilitation and peace-making. Such programmes would need to be part of the education process.

- **Land reform**

Similarly, land reform, which recognises that rural women have been rendered non-productive by the process of displacement and have generally lost the male head of household, must often be a component of long-term peace-building.

- **End of impunity for crimes of sexual violence:**

A recognition that sexual violence is unacceptable to the world community in the 21st century could be demonstrated by a high profile initiative in, for instance, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, similar to the Tokyo Tribunal held 50 years after the end of World War 2. The evidence against many perpetrators has already been collected. To use it would be a contribution to peace-making in the DRC itself and in the region; would have a ripple effect on the other militarised states in the region; and would profoundly alter the power relations for women in many other war and post-war contexts.

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