

EDITORIAL

Over the centuries, our perception of the protagonists in warfare has been shaped by stereotypes of men as the aggressors and women as peace-loving and passive bystanders. Public opinion and the media commonly reflect this supposed passive victimization of women, who tend to be portrayed as victims of fighting – a poignant story to elicit a compassionate response. However, the reality is that women also take an active role in hostilities and in their aftermath: as politicians, combatants, leaders of non-governmental organizations and social or political groups, and peace campaigners.

Women often assume many of the support roles during conflict, and women fighters can be extremely useful to an armed group. Moreover, the mobilization of Soviet women in the Second World War legitimized their active participation in war on an unprecedented scale; and nowadays women are integrated into the armed forces, in particular in the Western world. To varying degrees, women have always participated in armed struggles, especially in those such as civil wars that have mobilized large sections of the population and in wars where the survival of the nation was at stake.

The dichotomies between military and civilian, public and private, front line and home front, victims and perpetrators, and wartime and post-war societies are being steadily eroded. As the borders between military and civilian become blurred, so too does the distinction between the male warrior and the innocent woman. The assumption that women are harmless and arouse less suspicion can make them the preferred choice when it comes to transporting munitions, gathering intelligence, or deploying combatants and suicide bombers. A case in point is the Rwandan genocide of 1994, during which many women assumed a significant role as perpetrators of violence. This underscores the part played by women in sustaining conflict and their potential for inflicting extraordinary cruelty. Such examples, recurring throughout history, dismiss the myth that women are solely innocent and vulnerable victims of conflict.

What is clear is that it is simplistic to judge vulnerability on the basis of stereotypes. In all situations of conflict, a thorough assessment should be carried out to identify which social group is the most vulnerable, and why. Women are not a homogeneous group and, as shown above, they experience war in a multitude of ways – as victims, combatants, and promoters of peace. This issue of the *Review* moves 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 and its effects.

Armed conflicts – and especially internal conflicts – have a devastating impact on civilian populations. For women, there used to be a perceived security – a sense that as a woman, and especially as a mother, one would be spared the excesses of warfare. Present conflicts show that all too often this perception does not correspond to reality. On the contrary, civilian victims have frequently been the victims of choice and women are on many occasions targeted precisely because they are women.

Conflict and displacement have a unique impact on women, exposing them to specific dangers and threats and engendering a social transformation in which they are forced to assume new roles and responsibilities. Of course, women, men, boys, and girls face different risks. Whereas men make up the vast majority of those killed, held captive, or forcibly ‘disappeared’ during war, women are increasingly targeted as civilians and exposed to sexual violence.

Sexual violence is one of the most frequent and most traumatic violations that women suffer in wartime and strikes at the very heart of human dignity and physical integrity. By violating women, arms-bearers are able to humiliate and demoralize the community that could not protect them. Rape can be used as a deliberate tactic to destabilize families and communities whose integrity is perceived as inseparably linked to the ‘virtue’ of women. Such an assault causes immeasurable physical and psychological suffering and can also result in the victim being abandoned by her family or ostracized by the community.

Although sexual violence in conflict zones is as old as warfare itself, the international community has only devoted serious attention to it since the 1990s. In ancient times, the widespread abduction of women for sexual purposes was the very purpose of wars; they were the prize to be won. Sexual violence is nowadays expressly prohibited in international humanitarian law, encompassed by the ban on ‘wilfully causing great suffering or serious injury to body or health’, and acts of sexual violence are specifically included as individual crimes in the statutes of the international criminal courts. Thus, crimes of sexual violence have attained greater visibility and received marked importance in terms of prosecution under humanitarian law. Sexual violence is prohibited against men, women, girls, or boys. Appropriate punishment of breaches of this law and of instructions given to arms-bearers is mandatory. Rape is preventable; this must be recognized and action taken accordingly.

Women’s experience of war is multifaceted: it can mean separation from or the death of loved ones, the loss of their livelihood, a greater risk of forced displacement, deprivation, sexual violence, physical injury, or death. Throughout the world women are continuing to respond to war with remarkable courage, resourcefulness, and resilience, facing up to the effects of war and to the tremendous strain it imposes on their ability to sustain and protect themselves and their families. Present-day humanitarian operations increasingly reflect the growing

awareness of the unique roles that women assume in wartime. States and humanitarian organizations alike must be made responsible for alleviating the plight of women in times of war, and women themselves must be more closely involved in everything that is done on their behalf. Appropriate action requires a greater understanding of the impact of armed conflict on women and of the particular vulnerabilities with which they have to contend. It is vital to ensure that teams of both men and women work in the field so that access is also possible to women with a low social status who might be kept out of the public sphere. Understanding reality as experienced by women enables humanitarian organizations and personnel to respond more appropriately to their needs and improve their situation.

The focus has also been on the position of women within society, the characteristics that a society or culture defines as masculine or feminine, and the interaction of women with a society or culture in war. Men were seldom included in consideration of 'gender aspects' except as analysed in their traditional roles as combatants, and gender aspects are often synonymous with women's aspects. International humanitarian law is, however, based on equality of protection for all human beings and the prohibition of any adverse distinction founded on sex, and is therefore intended to be gender-neutral. Women benefit from the general protection afforded by this branch of law. Along with the rest of the civilian population, they must be protected from intimidation and abuse. Yet the law does also include a specific protection regime for women, primarily relating to their health and hygiene needs and their role as mothers. Human rights law and refugee law provide further protection for women in times of violence.

The challenge lies in ensuring that the existing rules are duly implemented and respected. Mechanisms to enforce rights and redress violations are of crucial importance. The UN Security Council has adopted several resolutions to protect women in situations of armed conflict. Moreover, the recent developments embodied in the international criminal courts and the prosecution of persons responsible for war crimes are a very important step forward in the fight against impunity, and may serve as a general deterrent against any repetition of such heinous conduct in future conflicts.

Constant efforts must be made to promote knowledge of and compliance with the obligations of international humanitarian law by as wide an audience as possible, and using all available means. The responsibility for improving the plight of women in times of war must be shared by everyone. Indeed, a gender-sensitive implementation of the law – attuned to the diverse experiences, perceptions, skills, attributes, and vulnerabilities of both men and woman – is vital to respond adequately to their needs.

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