

In War as in Peace: Sexual Violence and Women's Status

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More than ten years after the commencement of wars in the former Yugoslavia, and almost a decade after the Rwandan genocide—conflicts notorious for attacks on women and girls—combatants continue to use sexual violence as a tactic of war to terrorize and control civilian populations. Sexual violence targeting women and girls has been used in all recent conflicts, including in the former Yugoslavia, Sierra Leone, India (Kashmir), Rwanda, Sri Lanka, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Angola, Sudan, Côte d'Ivoire, East Timor, Liberia, Algeria, the Russian Federation (Chechnya), and northern Uganda.

Rape has always meant direct physical harm, trauma, and social ostracism for the victim. Now, it may also be a death sentence for many women. Women are increasingly, and sometimes deliberately, being infected with HIV through wartime rape. By disrupting normal economic activity and destroying bases of economic support, armed conflict also puts women at risk for trafficking and at greater risk for having to engage in “survival” sex or sexual bartering, through which many women are becoming infected with HIV.

Although there has been increasing international attention to sexual violence in armed conflict, two essential features have persisted. First, it is routinely used on a large scale in most wars against women (though much less frequently, men and boys too are sometimes targeted for sexual attack). Second, perpetrators of sexual violence continue to enjoy near complete impunity. Over the past decade, the number of successful prosecutions has been paltry compared to the scale of the crimes.

At the start of the 21st century, with some of the most horrific known examples of sexual violence during armed conflict taking place before our very eyes, we have to ask why wartime rape recurs with such alarming predictability. Why are women so consistently targeted for this specific type of assault? Ultimately, can wartime sexual violence be prevented?

Several critical factors make sexual violence in conflict resistant to eradication. First, women's subordinate and unequal status in peacetime renders them predictably at risk for sexual violence in times of war. Second, increasing international exposure and public

outrage about rape in conflict have failed to translate into vigorous investigation and prosecution of perpetrators, a necessary element in any serious effort to deter such violence. Finally, inadequate services for survivors of wartime sexual assault reflects official disregard for the harm women and girls suffer in the course of conflict and suggests a lack of commitment to facilitating rape survivors' reintegration into society.

Treatment of women in times of "peace"

Sexual violence has continued to be systematic and unrelenting in part because of state failure to take seriously, prevent, and prosecute routine and widespread discrimination and violence against women during times of "peace."

Women throughout the world face systemic attacks on their human rights and chronic, routinized and legal discrimination and violence, much of it justified through cultural and religious arguments. Even where discrimination is prohibited, it often persists in practice. By any reasonable measure, state failure to uphold women's rights as full and equal citizens sends an unmistakably clear message to the broader community that women's lives matter less, and that violence and discrimination against them is acceptable.

The discrimination and violence women endure is targeted at them in part or in whole because of their sex. In both law and practice, women are subordinate and unequal to men. Women are frequently denied their right to equality before the law; their right to substantive equality; their rights to freedom of movement, association, and expression; and equal access to education, work, and healthcare.

The state often plays a crucial and complicit role in permitting discrimination and violence targeting women and girls. For example, governments have abysmal records of prosecuting domestic and sexual violence against women. Since government statistics are so poor, it is debatable which of the two is less vigorously prosecuted.

Although most states fail to protect women as equal citizens on myriad fronts, state failure is particularly noteworthy with regard to the prevention and prosecution of sexual assault. In most countries, rape goes largely unreported. When it is reported, prosecutions are rarely successful and are sometimes determined by whether the victim was a virgin. Biased judicial officials disregard the testimony of women with sexual experience outside of marriage. Evidentiary standards disadvantage women. Moreover,

in some countries, a victim's failure to convince the state that she has a credible claim of rape can be converted into an admission of out-of-wedlock sex, and the state can prosecute her for adultery.

Many states fail to uphold women's right to sexual autonomy and bodily integrity in peacetime. Many women are legally unable to protect themselves from unwanted sex. States have enacted marital exemption clauses to rape. Some states still allow a rapist to marry the rape victim in order to escape punishment. Some states obstruct women's access to divorce. States permit customary and other practices—such as widow “cleansing,” forced marriage, and wife inheritance—to flourish, even though they are predicated on the rape of women.

In far too many countries, the honor of a community or family is still closely tied to control of the sexual activity of women and girls. Male family members often put a premium on female virginity, “purity,” or sexual inexperience. Consequently, combatants the world over know that targeting women and girls both inflicts grave harm on individuals *and* symbolically assaults the larger community (or ethnic group or nationality) to which the female victims belong. Until this fundamental fact changes, women and girls will always be at risk.

A principal impetus to sexual violence (whether in peace or wartime) is sexual subordination and deriving sexual gratification from sexually harming another. Such subordination is both an important motivation for the attack and an obstacle to subsequent prosecution—in part because women are still greatly stigmatized for the violence that is inflicted on them. Sexual violence is the only crime for which the community's reaction is often to stigmatize the victim rather than prosecute the perpetrator.

Many men are accustomed to enforcing gender norms and stereotypes through physical violence. They interact in violent ways (actual and threatened) with women without sanction, and sometimes with community and government support. Such violence is often culturally, sometimes legally, sanctioned.

This is the backdrop against which rape and other forms of gender-based violence in armed conflict must be understood. It is a continuation—and a significant worsening—of the various discriminatory and violent ways that women are treated in times of peace.

The following cases from armed conflicts in DRC and Sierra Leone illuminate the link between wartime sexual violence and other forms of gender-based violence and women's subordinate status in peacetime.

Sexual violence against women has been a pervasive and alarming feature of armed conflict in eastern DRC. Tens of thousands of women and girls have been assaulted. Most of the forces involved in the conflict—combatants of the Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie (RCD), Rwandan soldiers, the Mai-Mai, armed groups of Rwandan Hutu, and Burundian rebels of the Forces for the Defense of Democracy (Forces pour la défense de la démocratie, FDD) and Front for National Liberation (Front pour la libération nationale, FNL)—frequently and sometimes systematically rape women and girls. All parties to the conflict have been implicated. There is no sign of abatement. In early November 2003, the United Nations reported that in new fighting in eastern DRC thousands of women and girls had been tortured and raped.

Well before conflict broke out in DRC, women and girls were second-class citizens. The law and social norms defined the role of women and girls as subordinate to men. The Congolese Family Code expressly subordinates women in the family by requiring them to obey their husbands, who are recognized as the head of the household. Reflecting the community's sense that educating boys is more important than educating girls, a higher percentage of boys attend school than girls. Some male household heads "resolve" rape cases involving their daughters or sisters by accepting money payment from the perpetrator or his family, or by arranging to have the perpetrator marry the victim, thus underscoring the notion that rape was a crime against the perceived "owner" of the victim.

In Sierra Leone's armed conflict, sexual violence was committed on a much larger scale than the highly visible amputations for which Sierra Leone became notorious. Thousands of women and girls of all ages, ethnic groups, and socioeconomic classes were subjected to widespread and systematic sexual violence, including individual and gang rape. Rapes were perpetrated by both sides, but mostly by the rebel forces of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), and the West Side Boys, a splinter group of the AFRC.

Like women in DRC, Sierra Leonean women faced widespread discrimination in practice, law, and custom before armed conflict erupted—each compounding and

reinforcing the other, to women's enormous disadvantage. Although the constitution formally contains a guarantee of sex equality, provisions permitting discrimination in adoption, marriage, divorce, and inheritance, among other areas, nullify this guarantee. The constitution thus legitimizes and codifies women's subordinate and second-class status. In addition, under customary and Islamic law, the two systems under which most women are married, women have distinctly subordinate status. Notably, a married woman is often considered a minor and as such can be represented by her husband, who has the right to prosecute and defend actions on her behalf.

Further, married women in Sierra Leone had lost significant control over their sexual autonomy well before the war began. Under customary law, a wife can only refuse to have sexual intercourse with her husband if she is physically ill, menstruating, or breastfeeding. She can also refuse intercourse during the day, in the bush, or during Ramadan. Physical violence against women is widespread in Sierra Leone, and under customary law, a husband has the right to "reasonably chastise his wife by physical force." Men who were accustomed to exercise control over women's bodies in times of peace continued to do so with extreme brutality during the civil war.

In Sierra Leone, a complicated constellation of rape laws in the statutory system ensures minimal prosecution of rape. In some communities, the only type of rape that is treated as a serious crime is that of a virgin. Even in such cases, the punishment for rape in local courts often involves fines or "virgin money," payable to the victim's family. The emphasis continues to be on the injury to family honor and, to the extent the injury to the girl is considered, the emphasis is on her status as a virgin.

During armed conflict, combatants routinely abduct women—for long and short periods of time—and force them to become "wives," essentially obliging women to cook, clean, wash clothes, and have sex (and often as a consequence to bear children), all of which are stereotyped, gender-specific forms of labor. Such relationships, of course, mimic relationships during peacetime, especially peacetime situations in which forced marriage and expectations of free female labor are common practice. This stereotyped perception of women persists in wartime and puts them at great risk for abduction and violence.

For example, in Sierra Leone, the RUF and other rebel units regularly abducted women and girls, occasionally for combat, but most often for forced sex and slave labor. In eastern DRC, combatants abducted women and girls and held them for periods up to a year and a half, forcing them during that time to provide both sexual service and undertake gender-specific work. Women and girls were obliged to carry out domestic

labor, such as finding and transporting firewood, cooking, and doing laundry for the men who held them captive and sexually assaulted them. During Rwanda's genocide, militia members held some women in forced "marriages." These women not only were raped, but militia members held them and forced them to do household work, including cooking and cleaning. In Algeria's civil war, armed Islamist groups abducted women and girls from local villages, often times raped them, killed most, and held others in captivity to do cooking and other household work. Colombia's guerrilla and paramilitary forces recruit female child combatants, some of whom are pressured to have sexual relations with commanding officers and forced to use contraception. In northern Uganda, teenage girls are forced into sexual slavery as "wives" of Lord's Resistance Army commanders, who subject them to rape and other sexual violence, unwanted pregnancies, and the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS.

The male demand for female labor to perform female household chores persists during armed conflict. These patterns of social dominance and deeply engrained gender-specific roles get violently expressed in wartime and too often lead to women's abduction and enslavement during armed conflict.

This level of social conditioning and gender stereotyping can be addressed through education and through measures to ensure equality and respect for women's human rights. Such behavior must be punished through international—and one day local—prosecution.

Prevention

Many wars are foretold in some way. Rarely does a war erupt overnight. If wars can be anticipated, so can the fact that women will be victims of sexual violence during the fighting. National governments, the U.N., civil society, and regional actors must do more during peacetime, in periods when hostilities are mounting, and during the early stages of armed conflict to prevent sexual violence. Better training of combatants is a necessary first step.

Such training should include better and more regular instruction of combatants not only on protections generally due to civilians under international humanitarian law (IHL), but also the specific prohibitions against sexual violence.

Improved and more rigorous training and education on IHL will unlikely reach many of the less organized rebel groups increasingly participating in wartime rape, but it will reach more organized rebel groups and will affect a core group of uniformed soldiers and officers under state authority. Soldiers in the field should receive timely, clear, consistent, and regular training and reinforcement on the illegality and unacceptability of sexual violence in conflict, and should act as examples to other, nonregularized combatants.

Although it is doubtful that many of those who commit sexual assault in conflict and use it to their strategic ends are unaware of its illegality, governments are not relieved of their responsibility to continue to attempt to prevent sexual violence. Governments should disseminate information on its prohibition and signal a serious commitment to investigate and punish all humanitarian law violations, including sexual violence.

As civilians are likely to take up arms and participate in combat when the rule of law collapses or in times of civil war, better and broader education of civil society on IHL will also decrease the use of rape in conflict. Governments should engage in broad, grass-roots dissemination and education campaigns (radio, television, print media, internet) with as many components of civil society as possible to educate them about prohibitions under IHL, particularly the prohibitions against the use of sexual violence.

Training and deploying civil society monitors in times of war is potentially a significant deterrent and can aid post-conflict accountability efforts. Civil society monitors at all levels of society should be trained in the basics of international human rights and humanitarian law. As monitors, they can act as witnesses to violations and document them for future trials and other accountability mechanisms. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) with interest and relevant experience would be good candidates for this. This training should also benefit women by reinforcing what should always be the case—that sexual violence is a crime that should be prevented and punished even during peacetime.

International investigation and prosecution as deterrence

To date, sexual violence in armed conflict has been prosecuted primarily at the international level—through ad hoc courts created by the U.N. Security Council (the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, ICTY, and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, ICTR) and mixed or hybrid courts (such as the Sierra

Leone Special Court). Prosecution of sexual violence is an important indication of commitment to improved accountability for gender-specific crimes in conflict. It is also an important expression of commitment to deterring future crimes of this nature.

Although both the ICTY, established in 1993, and the ICTR, established in 1994, began strongly, their commitment seems to have waned after a number of important initial convictions. The present record is disappointing, given the high hopes that women's rights activists, female survivors of sexual violence, and others had held for the tribunals.

Both tribunals contributed groundbreaking international jurisprudence on sexual violence and gender-based crimes in armed conflict. However, both have been plagued by weak investigations and neither has had an effective long-term prosecution strategy that acknowledges the degree of wartime sexual violence suffered by women. Barring dramatic advances before the expiration of their respective mandates in 2010, in terms of sexual violence prosecutions each criminal tribunal risks being remembered for what it missed doing, rather than for what it achieved.

The ICTY was established to prosecute persons for serious violations of international humanitarian law, including grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions, war crimes, and crimes against humanity committed in the territory of the former Yugoslavia since 1991. Rape of women by combatants as a strategy of war featured prominently in the wars in the former Yugoslavia, up to and including the 1998-99 Kosovo conflict.

The women's human rights community the world over applauded the creation of the ICTY. They believed that the exercise of the ICTY's mandate and the public revelation and subsequent documentation of the widespread use of rape in wars in the former Yugoslavia would significantly erode the historic impunity afforded sexual violence in armed conflict. Activists hoped that the ICTY would pursue cases of sexual violence in conflicts in the former Yugoslavia as vigorously as, and on equal terms with, other crimes committed during the wars.

Yet, the ICTY—like its sister institution, the ICTR—has failed to meet expectations for establishing accountability for sexual violence in the former Yugoslavia. To its credit, it has indicted at least 27 individuals for crimes that involved either rape or sexual assault. (In perhaps its most famous recent case, the ICTY is trying former Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic for command responsibility for war crimes, including acts of sexual violence, in Kosovo.)

Though the ICTY's record on prosecution is underwhelming, several of its cases have nevertheless broken new ground in jurisprudence on sexual violence under international law. In one landmark case, in February 2001, the ICTY convicted Dragoljub Kunarac, Radomir Kovac, and Zoran Vukovic for rape, torture, and enslavement. The three received sentences of twenty-eight, twenty, and twelve years, respectively. These cases marked the first time in history that an international tribunal had indicted individuals solely for crimes of sexual violence against women. The ICTY ruled that rape and enslavement were crimes against humanity, another international precedent. The tribunal found that the defendants had enslaved six of the women. Most important, although two of the women were sold as chattel by Radomir Kovac, the ICTY found that enslavement of the women did not necessarily require the buying or selling of a human being. Such jurisprudence is the exception, not the rule.

Like the ICTY, the ICTR has failed to give priority to sexual violence cases after its initial landmark decisions involving rape. Although NGOs and U.N. agencies report that tens of thousands of women were sexually assaulted during the Rwandan genocide, the ICTR to date has handed down only one conviction involving sexual assault that has survived appeal.

Established to prosecute persons responsible for genocide and other serious violations of IHL, the ICTR issued a verdict in September 1998 that convicted former mayor Jean-Paul Akayesu for individual criminal and command responsibility on nine counts of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. The verdict was the first handed down by the Rwanda Tribunal; the first conviction for genocide by an international court; the first time an international court had punished sexual violence in a civil war; and the first time that rape was found to be an act of genocide when it was committed with the intent to destroy a particular group targeted as such.

Despite its promising start, the ICTR has been a weak vehicle for providing redress for sexual violence crimes committed against women during the 1994 genocide. Although at this writing there were more than a dozen cases pending that include charges of sexual violence, there had been only two convictions—that of Jean-Paul Akayesu and a later conviction of Alfred Musema, which was subsequently overturned on appeal in November 2001.

Even the Akayesu decision did not come without a fight. The ICTR initially was reluctant to indict Akayesu for rape. When Akayesu was first charged in 1996, the twelve counts in his indictment did not include sexual violence—despite the fact that Human Rights Watch and other rights groups had documented widespread rape during the genocide, particularly in areas under his control. A lack of political will among some high-ranking tribunal officials, as well as faulty investigative methodology by some investigative and prosecutorial staff, in part explains this initial omission. It was only after local and international women’s rights activists protested the absence of rape charges against Akayesu, including by submitting an amicus curiae brief to the ICTR urging it to bring charges of rape and other crimes of sexual violence against Akayesu, did the tribunal amend the indictment.

More generally, the ICTR’s effectiveness in investigating and prosecuting sexual violence has been hampered by a number of factors, including lack of financial resources, poor staff training, lack of political will, poor witness protection, weak investigations, and a general perception by investigators that rape cases are too hard to prove in court.

In 2001, in response to complaints by local and international NGOs about a lack of political will to prosecute sexual violence, the ICTR amended many of its indictments to include sexual violence charges. In meetings and letters, NGOs have expressed concerns that indictments have been hastily amended to include gender-based violence charges without substantial evidentiary support, and that this strategy will undermine the tribunal’s long-term effectiveness regarding the prosecution of sexual assault.

Whether cases of sexual violence are prosecuted at the local or international levels, programs to protect victims and witnesses at all stages are critical. Sexual violence prosecutions by the ICTY and the ICTR have been hampered or abandoned because female witnesses have felt that their testimony would put them at risk. In particular, they fear that their identities would be revealed and that their families would suffer retaliation and stigma.

Effective witness and victim protection programs are a cornerstone to successful prosecution. Women victims of sexual violence in the former Yugoslavia have refused to testify for fear that their identity would become known and they and their families would face reprisals. Female rape victims who have testified before the ICTR in Arusha have reported returning home to Rwanda to find that their testimony, including details of their rapes, are known by people in their home areas. Other rape survivors who have testified before the ICTR returned home to face anonymous threats and other

harassment as a result of their testimonies on rape. After such incidents, some Rwandan NGOs threatened to boycott the ICTR and discourage women from testifying if the ICTR did not improve its mechanisms for protecting their identity and safety.

It remains to be seen how effectively other international or mixed courts will investigate and prosecute sexual violence. However, the Special Court for Sierra Leone appears to be taking its mandate on sexual violence seriously. The court, which will try a limited number of perpetrators from all warring groups who bear the greatest responsibility for serious violations of IHL committed from November 1996 onward, has a mandate for three years. Investigating and prosecuting crimes of sexual violence have been an integral part of the investigative and prosecutorial strategy from the beginning of court operations in July 2002. As such, crimes of sexual violence—including rape, sexual enslavement, abduction or forced labor—form part of ten out of the total of thirteen indictments issued to date. The court has on staff two full-time gender crimes investigators and has conducted gender sensitivity training for all members of the investigations team.

The establishment of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in July 2001 (whose treaty came into force on July 1, 2002) holds the promise of establishing meaningful accountability for gender-based crimes against women in armed conflict. Women's rights activists in many countries hailed the creation of the Court, particularly those who have worked tirelessly for years to ensure that the ICC would be an effective and strong vehicle for accountability for wartime violence against women. Its statute criminalizes sexual and gender violence as war crimes and crimes against humanity. Accordingly, the definitions of war crimes and crimes against humanity include rape, sexual slavery (including trafficking of women), enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization, other forms of grave sexual violence, and persecution on account of gender.

In addition to this critical area of codification, the ICC's statute includes measures to facilitate better investigation of gender-based crimes and better care of female witnesses. It provides procedural protections for witnesses and victims, has rules of evidence to protect victims of sexual violence, requires the appointment of advisers with legal expertise on sexual and gender violence, and facilitates victims' direct participation in the court's proceedings.

In July 2003, the ICC prosecutor announced that he was following developments in the Ituri province in eastern DRC very closely. As noted above, the conflict there has

included widespread and systematic rape, as well as other forms of sexual violence against women and girls.

Post-conflict social reintegration

How governments treat survivors of sexual violence in the aftermath of conflict is a critical measure of their seriousness in addressing the crime and of their commitment to preventing future abuses.

Justice and accountability for female victims of sexual violence in armed conflict is not merely a matter of international or local prosecution but should include a focus on programs and services to address the psychological and physical injuries to victims and to assist their reintegration into the broader community. Too often in post-conflict settings female survivors of sexual assault are left with little community support, insufficient economic means to sustain themselves (and often children who are the product of rape), and profound physical and psychological trauma.

Communities often blame women and girls abducted by members of warring factions for what happened to them. When conflict ends, the women and girls often do not return home for fear of being rejected by their families and typically find little support and certainly no specially designed programs to address their needs. As such, many are left with no other option but to remain with the very rebel or militia “husband” who abducted and most often raped them.

Because of the persistent stigma attached to sexual violence victims in most of the world, many women are discouraged from ever coming forward to seek help. Women victims of rape often face ostracism by their families, intimate partners, and communities (in the worst cases they become victims of “honor crimes”); if they are married, they risk being divorced or otherwise abandoned by their husbands; and if they are not married, they risk never becoming so (and therefore living as outcasts from their communities). Those infected by HIV can expect even more discrimination and stigma from their families and communities. Many survivors of sexual violence will unnecessarily suffer and die in silence, absent well-designed programs and community efforts to urge them to come forward for assistance.

It would be a gross injustice if women survived sexual violence in armed conflict only to have to endure similar abuses in peacetime. Governments committed to the recovery of

sexual violence survivors must undertake efforts to improve women's human rights in all aspects of their lives and eradicate discrimination against them. To this end, governments need to focus specific efforts on protecting women's sexual autonomy, in part by reviewing laws and customary practices to eliminate all impediments to women's equal and autonomous sexual decision-making. This means, in part, ending forced marriage; eradicating discriminatory nationality laws; decriminalizing adult, consensual sex; ending wife inheritance; ending widow "cleansing"; criminalizing spousal rape; ending inheritance and property rights discrimination against women; reviewing personal status laws and customs and guaranteeing women equal rights in the family; ending all harmful customary practices that subordinate women sexually; and vigorously condemning, investigating, and prosecuting all forms of violence against women, in particular sexual violence.

Post-conflict recovery for sexual violence survivors also requires the establishment of educational and work programs to enable them to become economically self-sufficient. Access to economic opportunities is critical because, first, women survivors of sexual violence are very likely to be the primary caretakers of their own children and other relatives; and second, many women may be in desperate need of medical attention for treatment of HIV-related and other illnesses, and to stave off full-blown AIDS. Women must be given the means to provide for themselves and their dependents and thus to avoid the need to exchange sex for basic goods, services, or shelter. Economic autonomy better positions women to refuse unwanted sex and reclaim their bodily integrity.

Sexual violence victims need services to address the extensive physical and psychological consequences of sexual assault. They frequently suffer long-term physical and emotional scarring. Many survivors of sexual violence confront unwanted pregnancies, debilitating gynecological problems, and untreated sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV. Post-traumatic stress syndrome and other lasting psychological consequences of assault plague women survivors and can obstruct their full and productive reintegration into civil society. In a post-conflict setting, it is critical that individual governments and the international community work quickly to reconstitute healthcare services and establish mechanisms to improve rape survivors' access to these services. This accessible care should include counseling, information, and treatment for a range of STDs, including HIV.

In this context, making post-exposure HIV prophylaxis (PEP) easily available to female survivors of sexual violence could save many lives. PEP, a standard policy for rape and

sexual assault survivors in many countries, is an affordable four-week treatment with antiretroviral drugs that can prevent HIV disease in persons raped by an HIV-positive perpetrator. Where it already exists as a service in peacetime, it should be possible to preserve in wartime. Where it does not exist already, it should be a priority for donors concerned about the impact of sexual violence in war.

Doctors Without Borders (Médecins Sans Frontières), the humanitarian medical aid agency, has been providing PEP as part of its package of care for sexual violence survivors in emergency settings, including in DRC and Congo-Brazzaville, demonstrating that this is a feasible intervention in conflict settings. U.N. agencies are also currently reviewing the inclusion of PEP in reproductive health kits provided in emergency settings.

National governments should work with NGOs and other actors in civil society to help sexual violence survivors re-integrate into society and, if they wish, seek redress. For example, in DRC, local human rights and women's NGOs have joined forces and started to document abuses against women and girls more systematically. The Coalition against Sexual Violence in South Kivu was formed in December 2002 as an advocacy platform. Local churches are involved in providing spaces for rape survivors to discuss their trauma, as part of the recuperation process.

Women should be active participants in the rebuilding of civil society—and not just in traditionally “female” spheres, such as those involving children, health, or welfare. U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security, adopted in October 2000, recognizes the important role women can and should be playing in pre and post-conflict societies, as a means to prevent conflict in the first place and as a means to achieve sustainable peace once conflict has ended and ensure women's greater participation in government. Governments should look to this resolution for guidance, and should actively undertake efforts to have women participate fully in the planning and implementation of the reconstruction of civil society, as full and equal partners at all levels of decision-making.

Focusing post-conflict efforts on promoting civil, political, economic, cultural, and social rights for all women will invariably improve the prospects of many survivors of sexual violence. The same efforts will improve women's status more generally and render them less at risk for violence in times of war.

The end of sexual violence against women in armed conflict

One of the greatest challenges is to prevent sexual violence against women in the first instance. This can be achieved by making concerted efforts in at least three arenas. First, there must be heightened respect for women's human rights in all aspects of their lives. Failure to address sex discrimination as a significant underlying cause of sexual violence will ensure that present and future generations of women continue to be at risk for sexual violence. Second, there must be significantly improved compliance with the provisions of IHL during armed conflicts. Key methods include regular training and education of soldiers and other combatants regarding international legal protections for civilians, specifically prohibitions against rape and other forms of gender-based violence. Finally, there must be vigorous condemnation, investigation, and prosecution of gender-specific crimes against women in times of peace as well as war.