



Gender Violence, Conflict, Internal Displacement And Peacebuilding

Swarna Rajagopalan

Abstract

The overlay of conflict, displacement and gender violence is altogether so traumatic as to beg the question: is true, sustainable peace possible where the experience of gender violence is both widespread and deeply embedded? A discussion about gender violence and peace-building takes us back to very old questions about peace and justice, which this essay explores by summarising what we know about gender violence, conflict and displacement.

Author Profile

Swarna Rajagopalan is a political scientist, with a special interest in gender and security issues. She is the co-editor (with Farah Faizal) of *Women, Security, South Asia: A Clearing in the Thicket* (New Delhi: Sage, 2005) and has otherwise written prolifically on this subject for academic, electronic and mainstream media. Based in Chennai, she works as an independent scholar and consultant. She is also the founder of Prajnya Initiatives.

In the last year, South Asians have had to face up to a long-standing reality—that thousands of people are displaced within their country because of circumstances they cannot control—as a consequence of an upsurge of fighting in two conflicts, the Sri Lankan Army’s campaign against Tiger strongholds and the Pakistan Army’s campaign against the Taliban. Displaced persons flee violence, but continue to experience violence in flight and beyond. Displaced women and children particularly are vulnerable to physical abuse and sexual exploitation, both of which leave wounds that smart throughout a life.

Can peace coexist with any kind of violence in society? What does the persistence of gender violence portend for the prospects of ending conflict and building peace in any context? Persons displaced within their own country as a consequence of conflict represent an important constituency and factor for peacebuilding; how does the increased experience of violence by women and children, even men, in their numbers predispose them towards any post-conflict dispensation?

What is gender violence?

“Gender violence,” “gender-based violence,” “sexual violence” and “violence against women” are used interchangeably in everyday discussions. However, they are not exactly co-terminus and it is useful to differentiate between them.

Violence against women refers to violence experienced by women that singles them out by virtue of their gender, and it may be sexual violence or other physical violence. The new Indian law on domestic violence extends the understanding of violence beyond the physical and sexual to include verbal, emotional and economic abuse. Sexual violence may or may not be actually physical; street sexual harassment (euphemistically described as ‘eve-teasing’) and workplace sexual harassment illustrate this.

“Gender-based violence” is defined by Judy Benjamin and Lynn Murchison as “violence that is directed at an individual based on her or his specific gender role in a society.”¹ The use of the term gender instead of women signals several things. First, it acknowledges that women, men, gay and transgender individuals experience this kind of violence. Second, gender violence can take any form and includes sexual violence but is not limited to it. Dowry harassment is gender violence, so are honour killings, pre-natal sex selection, forced marriage and trafficking. Finally, it imports the feminist view that such violence expresses nothing more or less than the desire to

¹ Judy A. Benjamin and Lynn Murchison, *Gender-Based Violence: Care & Protection of Children in Emergencies: A Field Guide* (Save the Children, 2004), 3.

control another person or community. Gender hierarchy articulated through gender violence becomes the vocabulary through which other forms of social and political control are asserted, established, consolidated and maintained.

The use of 'gender' rather than 'women' allows us to connect gender violence to other forms of violence in society. Making this connection is the first step to taking violence that is perpetrated by individuals against individuals (no matter whether family, clan, culture or community offer the pretext) into the public sphere and building a political and policy agenda around its elimination.

Bringing up the rear in the social hierarchy of a predominantly patriarchal world, however, more women and girls experience gender violence than do men or sexual minorities. Therefore, the slippage between gender violence and violence against women in everyday parlance as well as in academic and political writing is largely a reflection of the world as it is.

Those of us that campaign against gender violence are often asked: Is this still a problem? Is this very common? The short answer is: yes. UN reports regularly state that at least one out of every three women around the world has been beaten, coerced into sex or abused in their lifetime; moreover, a very small percentage ever tell anyone about that experience.² Cutting across class, caste, community, age or any other variable, human beings experience gender violence on a scale that for any other kind of disease would be considered pandemic proportions.

Gender violence is facilitated among other factors by patriarchal social hierarchies including male child preference; by the acceptance of violence as a mode of social interaction and political interface; by socio-economic inequality; by easy access to guns; and by a breakdown of norms and social structures. Many of these conditions obtain during conflict and displacement. What are the prospects for peace-building given that conflict and then displacement increase the incidence of gender violence manifold? Moreover, what would it take to build peace in the circumstances?

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in South Asia

When you take into account that internal displacement is a function of conflict, disasters and development projects, then, even leaving out other forms of forced migration such

² See *Gender Violence in India 2009: A Prajnya Report* (Chennai: Prajnya Initiatives, November 2009), <http://www.prajnya.in/gvr09.pdf>.

as trafficking, we can say that the number of internally displaced persons in South Asia is extremely large, even if we cannot provide an authoritative figure.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre estimates that at least 26 million people were displaced at the end of 2008.³ South Asia alone has around 3 million of these, distributed as in Table 1.0.⁴ Women and girls make up the majority of those internally displaced, it is commonplace to say. But one of the challenges of working in this field is that both the aggregate numbers and the gender disaggregated percentages are estimates – at best, these numbers are thus indicative of the scale of the problem.

The numbers are also likely to be much higher in reality. Typically news reports cover flight after conflict or disasters. Displacement as a result of development projects whether it is infrastructure construction like roads or dams or the purchase of land for setting up special economic zones, is largely undocumented. What we know is that cities across the subcontinent take in vast numbers of displaced persons who need to find new homes and new livelihoods. Informal settlements house them, outside the administrative and legal purview of municipal authorities.

Country	Estimate
Bangladesh	60,000-500,000
India	At least 500,000
Nepal	50,000-70,000
Pakistan	1.25 million
Sri Lanka	Over 300,000

We live with the knowledge of internal displacement but like many other forms of deprivation and disenfranchisement, we learn over time not to see it—here the ‘we’ refers both to the policy-making elite and to the voting/agitating public, an intersecting set.

It is important to note that because they do not cross a border, there are no international treaties or conventions that protect IDPs. Moreover, international organizations working with other displaced populations are at a disadvantage working to provide for the needs of the internally displaced. The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement are not legally binding and states may or may not use them as a reference point in

³ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, *Global IDP estimates (1990-2006)*, 2008, [http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004CE90B/\(httpPages\)/10C43F54DA2C34A7C12573A1004EF9FF?OpenDocument&count=1000](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004CE90B/(httpPages)/10C43F54DA2C34A7C12573A1004EF9FF?OpenDocument&count=1000)

⁴ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, *Global statistics: IDP country figures*, 2009, [http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004CE90B/\(httpPages\)/22FB1D4E2B196DAA802570BB005E787C?OpenDocument&count=1000](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004CE90B/(httpPages)/22FB1D4E2B196DAA802570BB005E787C?OpenDocument&count=1000)

framing their own policies and actions. In the absence of laws or frameworks based on the Guiding Principles, the internally displaced are by and large not recognised as a population with special needs.

Gender Violence and Internal Displacement

Judy El-Bushra identifies four important questions to ask concerning gender and forced migration (of which internal displacement is a variety): “the impact of interventions on processes of social change, the management of camps for refugees and displaced persons, sexual violence against women and the implementation of international conventions and guidelines on the rights of (especially women) refugees and IDPs.”⁵ The experience of gender violence actually cuts across all these questions.⁶

Neither flight nor other forced migration allows an individual the luxury of moving with their property or community. Moreover, international norms on evacuation posit a hierarchy of needs, with the sick and wounded evacuated first, followed by women, children and elderly.⁷ Adult and young men and boys are left behind, vulnerable to fire as well as recruitment.⁸ The result is that women outnumber men in most conflict displacement contexts.

Broken families may be further decimated in the course of flight. Landmines, bandits, abduction, trafficking, illness turning fatal due to lack of medical facilities and separation en route contribute to decimating an individual’s support structure. Adolescent and little girls are most vulnerable in these circumstances to sexual abuse and exploitation, to abduction and sexual slavery by militias and to forced marriages.⁹ Adult women too, however, face similar threats. It is very hard for women and children

⁵ Judy El-Bushra, “Gender and forced migration: editorial,” *Forced Migration Review* 9 (2000) : 5.

⁶ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Sexual and Gender-Based Violence against Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons: Guidelines for Prevention and Response* (2003). On page 20, the report charts the different kinds of gender violence experienced at different stages of the refugee cycle.

⁷ R. Charli Carpenter, “Women and Children First’: Gender, Norms, and Humanitarian Evacuation in the Balkans 1991–95,” *International Organization* 57 (2003): 681.

⁸ There is a variation to this tale. Amena Mohsin describes the homesteading role of mothers who stayed behind to hold on to their property in the middle of the 1971 war following which Bangladesh was founded. See, Amena Mohsin, “Silence and Marginality: Gendered Security and the Nation-State,” in *Women, Security, South Asia: A Clearing in the Thicket*, ed. Farah Faizal and Swarna Rajagopalan, (New Delhi: Sage, 2005), 134-153.

⁹ See *Refugee Girls: The Invisible Faces of War* (New York: Women’s Refugee Commission, 2009) and *Untapped Potential: Adolescents affected by armed conflict* (New York: Women’s Commission for refugee women and children, 2000).

to stay safe from gender violence and sexual predators when their social support network has been shattered.

The word 'refugee' conjures up images of camps segregated from the host country's mainstream and camp conditions that are definitively sub-human: cramped quarters that women and children sometimes live with strangers; long walks beyond the settlement to collect firewood for fuel; lacking enough, decent, accessible toilets and needing to walk in the dark to use a distant, common toilet in order to have privacy; shortages conspiring to make sex currency for those seeking rations; desperate parents selling or trafficking some children to take care of others. Opportunities for gender violence abound: from sexual harassment, molestation and rape to trafficking and forced marriage to honour killings. In the name of protection, the community is more likely to place limits on a woman's mobility and agency than to alter the conditions that facilitate violence.

Many refugees live outside camps and almost all internally displaced persons do. This is why their movement to camps in Sri Lanka has seemed more like interment than temporary settlement. Where they are not in a structured setting, displaced persons face three important disadvantages: they cannot avail whatever relief supplies are being distributed; their presence, experiences and problems remain undocumented within relief networks and support services; and finally, they are dispersed and separated from others who might have fled with them, shared their experiences and formed the kernel of a new support network for them. The willingness to reach out to rebuild community depends on whether an individual is able to communicate with those around her and whether she thinks they will remain in the same place for a while.

IDPs suffer the same ruptures and traumas as refugees but because they do not leave their country, there are no special regimes or dispensations for them. They must continue to be governed by the same laws, share in the same pie and face the same civil rights challenges as they did before displacement but without the emotional security of belonging to a place or the political security of being native. The *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* enjoin governments to protect women and girls, both by safeguarding them from gender violence as well as assuring their rights.

The political equivalent of not having a social support system is not having a voice in the political dispensation of your host location. A displaced person, even within her own country, may not have a vote in the constituency to which she has moved. She will not have address and identity proof. She will not own property there. A displaced woman or girl who experiences sexual violence has nowhere to lodge a complaint and

seek justice. This compounds the impunity enjoyed by perpetrators of gender violence within that society. She is much more vulnerable in the new location but has the same level of protection from the judicial system as before.

Impunity is a serious issue in most contexts when it comes to gender violence. But in the context of the IDP experience it has even more disastrous consequences. Impunity as a function of the absence of applicable, relevant laws as well as the lack of enforcement capability is relatively easily addressed. But those who commit atrocities against IDP communities enjoy impunity for two other reasons: IDPs fall between the cracks of protection extended to 'locals' and to foreign 'refugees' and quite often, it is those in charge of their protection that are responsible for sexual exploitation and other forms of gender violence. Knowing their chances of being punished are virtually nil, emboldens potential perpetrators, and knowing they will not get justice, reduces victims and survivors to silence about gender violence. Impunity has thus been described as "the second wound of rape."¹⁰

Sometimes, during a crisis, women and girls take on non-traditional roles, exercise agency in both everyday matters as well sometimes as camp-related matters, have access to education and health care that was earlier unavailable to them. This could be a function of circumstance with men and boys having stayed behind, been recruited into fighting or having been killed or injured, or even a function of particular relief schemes by international or non-governmental agencies. This is intrinsically positive. However, there are certain conditions in which this positive change boomerangs on the very sections it is intended to empower.

First, interventions that leave men and boys disengaged and alienated are as detrimental in the long run to gender equity as those overlooking the needs of women and girls. Simon Turner describes camps in Burundi where men find themselves sidelined, first, because relief programmes restore to women agency they are said to have lost during the conflict, but which they might never have had; then, by virtue of UNHCR being better placed to provide for their families than they are; and finally, with younger men taking on responsibilities for the community because they learn new

¹⁰ IRIN Web Special, *Our Bodies – Their Battle Ground: Gender-based Violence in Conflict Zones* (2004), 14, <http://www.irinnews.org/pdf/in-depth/GBV-IRIN-In-Depth.pdf>.

languages faster and are mobile.¹¹ Violence is often a response to other feelings of powerlessness and alienation, and interventions that empower women while sidelining men facilitate the use of violence as a control mechanism. In fact, elsewhere in the same article, Turner's interlocutors saw in their camps a situation of "moral decay," where: "Women were becoming prostitutes, men were polygamists, divorce rates were going up and young men were marrying old women."¹²

Gender Violence and Conflict

Insofar as women got a look in on traditional narratives and conventional analyses of conflict, they were victims or potentially vulnerable members of society. Thus, they had to be protected. Wars were fought in the name of their protection and of all the property belonging to the male members of society, they were to receive protection on a priority basis, along with children. Women whose agency was recognized were so rare as to form the subject of story and myth—an Boadicea or Lakshmibai here, a Florence Nightingale there or a St. Joan of Arc or Durga.¹³

The narrative of victimhood is a feature of traditional histories of war and international relations that feminist abhor. Writing about gender violence, however, it is hard to deny the victimhood of women. It is hard to ignore the vulnerability of women and children. We meet feminist critiques of traditional international relations part of the way by acknowledging that men also experience gender violence, sexual violence in particular. Neither agency nor victimhood is the monopoly of men or women.

In times of conflict women, and in some cases men, experience gender violence which exacerbates the general, common impact conflict has on people in general: death, injury, bereavement, displacement, loss of property and loss of livelihood. Combatants on either side use sexual violence as a part of their battleplan.¹⁴ In any case, militarised societies experience, and absorb, higher levels of violence. The conflict environment

¹¹ Simon Turner, "Vindicating masculinity: the fate of promoting gender equality," *Forced Migration Review* 9 (2000) : 8-9. See also Catherine Brun, "Making young displaced men visible," *Forced Migration Review* 9 (2000) : 10-12.

¹² Simon Turner, *ibid.*, 8.

¹³ Boadicea, an English queen from the early Christian era, led her troops in rebellion against their Roman conquerors. Lakshmibai, the dowager queen of Jhansi, fought with rebel troops against the British in 1857. Lakshmibai's contemporary, Florence Nightingale attended to the wounded during the Crimean War (1854-6), creating a new identity and respect for nursing as a profession. Joan of Arc was a young French peasant who rallied French troops against an invading English army in the first part of the fifteenth century. Durga is a form of the Indian mother-goddess, and as such epitomizes primal energy.

¹⁴ Jennifer Turpin, "Many Faces: Women Confronting War," in *The Women and War Reader*, ed. Lois Ann Lorentzen and Jennifer Turpin (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 4-7.

effectively provides opportunity and impunity for violence that would have occurred anyway, but is almost facilitated by the circumstances.

Rape has been a part of violent conflict through human history but scholars have come to recognize the systematic, planned acts of rape—often gang-rape, carried out before witnesses, intended to subjugate and humiliate—during conflict as a separate category, sometimes described as genocidal rape. A securitization act, this points to rape's profound impact on both the individual who is raped and her/his community.¹⁵ Rhonda Copelon however, argues that this view, somewhat reflected in international law, not only allows rape to be invisible once more and obscures its gendered dimension, it also obscures the reality that war rape shares characteristics in common with gang-rape and marital rape.¹⁶ Writing about girls in conflict zones, Carolyn Nordstrom asks, “..would we as readily accept the physical and sexual abuse of children in war if child prostitution did not flourish in many countries, if domestic violence and incest were not tacitly allowed simply because these crimes are very difficult to formally uncover and prosecute?”¹⁷ The same question applies to adult women as well.

In addition to being recognized as gendered violence during the conflict, rape should be recognized as including all forms of sexual torture, humiliation and violence that women and men experience, beyond just vaginal penetration. Antjie Krog writes that South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission had to contend with terms of reference that did not include rape but just “severe ill-treatment” and South African law that defined rape “as occurring only between a man and a woman and involving the penetration of the vagina by the penis.”¹⁸ The absence of a comprehensive category left no room for testimonies about rape to be specifically recorded as such.

¹⁵ “Securitization” is a concept developed by international relations theorists of the Copenhagen School. It captures the idea that when something is labeled a ‘security’ issue, it is taken out of the realm of ordinary politics and policy-making and placed in a discursive realm where there is less openness and more discretionary power to act. Securitization works when we accept such removal and relocation of a subject. The canonical text on this is Barry Buzan, Ole Waever and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Press, 1997).

¹⁶ Rhonda Copelon, “Surfacing Gender: Reconceptualizing Crimes against Women in Time of War,” *The Women and War Reader*, ed. Lois Ann Lorentzen and Jennifer Turpin, (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 64, 75.

¹⁷ Carolyn Nordstrom, “Girls Behind the (Front) Lines,” *The Women and War Reader*, ed. Lois Ann Lorentzen and Jennifer Turpin, (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 86.

¹⁸ Antjie Krog, “Locked into Loss and Silence: Testimonies of Gender and Violence at the South African Truth Commission,” *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors? Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence*, ed. Caroline O.N. Moser and Fiona C. Clark (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2001), 206.

Women activists appear, by all accounts, to be singled out for particularly brutal treatment.¹⁹ In addition to underscoring their subjugation in custody and humiliating them, it appears that sexual violence against women activists is designed to diminish their political significance and their agency. Lois Ann Lorentzen paraphrases Ana Guadalupe Martinez, an activist from El Salvador, saying while sexual violence was their main suffering, “Constant references to rape and sexual abuse were the most demoralizing aspect of imprisonment.”²⁰ In Krog’s very moving article, she writes about many factors contributing to silence on the part of otherwise vocal women—the kind of humiliation, a culture where some vocabulary was meant to be private—and the invisibility of their pain. Krog writes, quoting South African activists who shared their experiences with her:

“Female premiers, ministers, business women – they all kept silent. Some of them had been tortured, some of them raped. All of them are formidable women. Yet they did not come forward. They did not speak. ‘How can I?’ one asked me. ‘The police force is my provincial portfolio. I don’t want to know that when I address them, that they look at me thinking...’ Some gave other reasons: ‘The day I became involved in the struggle I made a choice and I fully understood the consequences of it.’ ... ‘I didn’t tell a single soul about it. I don’t want them to pity me. I don’t want them to call me names.’”²¹

Related to rape is the idea that forcibly impregnating women can help wipe out a community. Children in most societies are thought to inherit the ethnicity of their father; when raped women give birth to the enemy’s children, they are seen as contributing to the destruction of their community. The humiliation is a bonus for those who choose this strategy, which has been used in conflict settings as different as Sarajevo, Rwanda and Bangladesh.

Conflict zones offer a facilitating environment for gender violence of all sorts. Conflict, especially but not just protracted conflict, transforms society and culture irreversibly; militarization is one example. Anuradha M. Chenoy defines militarization as “the process that emphasizes the use of coercive structures and practices.”²² Militarization

¹⁹ Antjie Krog, *ibid.*, 203-206.

²⁰ Lois Ann Lorentzen, “Women’s Prison Resistance: Testimonios from El Salvador,” *The Women and War Reader*, ed. Lois Ann Lorentzen and Jennifer Turpin, (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 197.

²¹ Antjie Krog, *op. cit.*, 205-06.

²² Anuradha M. Chenoy, “Militarization, Conflict, and Women in South Asia, in *The Women and War Reader*, ed. Lois Ann Lorentzen and Jennifer Turpin, (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 101.

and its attendant ideology, militarism can pervade institutions, structures and behaviours in times of peace as well, and both are underpinned by patriarchy and ideas about masculinity. As Chenoy puts it, "Militarism is part of the wider web of social relations between state and society, between groups, and between men and women."²³ Rita Manchanda affirms, "Cultural violence against women gets magnified as conflict promotes macho values which legitimise misogyny."²⁴

Gender violence, especially prostitution and domestic violence, becomes more common in the context of militarization and militarism.

Cynthia Enloe's work has consistently highlighted the twinning of a military presence with prostitution.²⁵ American bases in the Asia-Pacific and the use of women by the Japanese army from minority and conquered groups as 'Comfort Women' are well-known examples, but they are not the only ones. Prostitution, the capture of women by troops for sexual slavery and the barter of sex for food and other essential supplies are known to happen beyond the contexts of established bases and occupying armies. In recent years, peace-keepers and peace-builders have also been accused of sexually exploiting women in the communities where they are located.

More invisible yet more pervasive, the presence of conflict correlates positively to increasing levels of domestic violence.²⁶ This is attributed to two factors. The first is that weapons are more easily available in times of war, especially if there are demobilized combatants in the household. Notwithstanding the rhetoric of those who defend the right of individuals to bear arms, the fact is that when weapons are available, they get used against whoever is present and vulnerable.²⁷ The second factor, in Rita Manchanda's words, is that, "Men compensate for their loss of power by hitting out at women."²⁸ This is true both in the conflict and post-conflict phase. Powerlessness comes

²³ Anuradha M. Chenoy, *ibid.*, 108.

²⁴ Rita Manchanda, "Where are the women in South Asian Conflict?" in *Women, War and Peace in South Asia*, ed. Rita Manchanda (New Delhi: Sage, 2001), 18.

²⁵ Relevant works by Cynthia Enloe: *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); *The Morning After: Sexual Politics at the end of the Cold War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); *Globalization & Militarism: Feminists Make the Link* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

²⁶ A really good summary of lessons from the field is available at Helpdesk Research Report: Conflict and sexual and domestic violence against women, Governance and Social Development Centre, Birmingham, Date: 01/05/09, <http://www.gsdc.org/docs/open/HD589.pdf>.

²⁷ See Amnesty International, *The impact of guns on women's lives*, (ACT 30/001/2005, 2005), <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ACT30/001/2005>.

²⁸ Rita Manchanda, *op.cit.*, 18.

from several factors: the loss of livelihood and home; injury; being displaced; and the experience of subjugation at the enemy's hands.

For women, the breakdown of social networks due to conflict is an important reason why they are so much more vulnerable in times of conflict. In a sense, conflict creates opportunity and impunity together—an opportunity-impunity window, we might say. Sexual harassment, exploitation, trafficking, forced marriage, domestic and intimate partner violence and rape are all more common in conflict situations than before or after. But there are two kinds of impunity that really make this possible. The first is that with broken or separated families and extended community networks, there is no one to challenge gender violence. Parents, siblings, neighbours, cousins—that network, if it were a protective one, is likely in disarray. But even more there is a climate of impunity that works at multiple levels. First of all, the rhetoric of hostilities sometimes sanctions gender violence, as we have seen. It may not always be organized or on a large scale, but where there is sanction for violence against the other community it extends also, maybe especially, to gender violence.²⁹ Secondly, conflict's end raises the challenging of building peace over a recent history of bitter hostility. Truth commissions and war crimes trials may or may not recognize gender violence as a separate category of crimes. But impunity really comes with the promise of political amnesty. For all gender violence committed in the name of conflict, amnesty is available as it is for other political acts.

The full import of the opportunity-impunity window is illustrated by an example from South Africa, where the post-apartheid amnesty extended to sexual violence when it was a part of ethnic cleansing. Antjie Krog writes that men were claiming to have raped girls for political reasons and this was so common that a neologism was coined to indicate the rape of girls “who seem to be doing their own thing.”³⁰

Reading academic research and field reports about gender violence during conflict is disturbing and haunting. Voices and stories stay with the reader long after the research is done. For those who experience this brutality and who live with violence and its memories, how much harder must it be to imagine, to build and to live peace?

²⁹ On gender violence in the Bosnian conflict, see Darius M. Rejali, “After Feminist Analyses of Bosnian Violence,” 26-32; Cynthia Enloe, “All the Men are in the Militia, All the Women are Victims: The Politics of Masculinity and Femininity in Nationalist Wars,” 50-62; and Vesna Nikolić-Ristanović, “War, Nationalism, and Mothers in the Former Yugoslavia,” 234-239, all in *The Women and War Reader*, ed. Lois Ann Lorentzen and Jennifer Turpin, (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

³⁰ Antjie Krog, *op.cit.*, 207.

Conflict + Displacement + Gender Violence = The Road to Peace?

“When I look around, I marvel at how we battle to be normal – and no one knows how shattered we are inside.”³¹

The overlay of conflict, displacement and gender violence is altogether so traumatic as to beg the question: is true, sustainable peace possible where the experience of gender violence is both widespread and deeply embedded?

We pose this question in an international climate that has changed considerably to accommodate gender concerns and recognize women’s experiences. The conflict in Bosnia drew the attention of the international community to the systematic and strategic use of sexual violence during war. The Rwandan genocide underscored this reality. The terms of reference for the International Criminal Tribunals established to investigate and try war crimes in both those cases, recognised rape as a crime against humanity. The first convictions from these tribunals were followed by the recognition in 2000 of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, which advocates an active role for women in peace processes and peace-building while also calling on concerned authorities to take measures to protect women and girls from gender violence. In 2008, the Security Council passed another resolution, this time specifically expressed concern about the continuing, even rising, sexual violence perpetrated against women in conflict zones, and called for protection, prevention and an end to impunity. In just a year, Resolution 1888 followed, reiterating concern and this time calling for a Special Representative to coordinate efforts to respond to victim’s needs.³² It would seem that we live in an age where the relationship between the pervasiveness of gender violence and prospects for peace-building has finally been recognized. However, although the same principles and conventions apply to all conflicts, conflict-displacement situations and peace-building processes, these do not always follow the pattern of negotiated ceasefire, mediation, treaties, trials and punishment.

Far too often, as these resolutions recognize, justice is delayed, ergo, denied. Victims of gender violence have to wait not just for justice but for negotiations about what processes must obtain and what amnesties will be granted. The internally displaced

³¹ Antjie Krog, *ibid.*, 205-6.

³² You can access the full-text of the United Nations Resolutions through WomenWatch, *Women and Armed Conflict*, Directory of UN Resources on Gender and Women’s Issues, http://www.un.org/womenwatch/directory/women_and_armed_conflict_3005.htm.

depend not on these special tribunals or processes for justice but the workings of the local legal system. By the time a specific case comes to court, the victim may have had to relocate again, the perpetrator may have been killed or displaced and evidence which is hard enough to gather in peacetime, may simply not be available.

Identity politics and the identification of women's bodies with the identity and prestige of a community are at the root of much of the gender violence that people in conflict zones and the conflict-displaced face. Equally, time and again, in response to the question, "What drove women to join this or that rebel movement?" one hears that they did so either to avenge gender violence or because rape did not leave them anywhere else to go. A grave concern relating to gender violence, conflict and displacement is the long-term legacy of lingering trauma and memories. In our time, this memory is also kept alive through photography and film, used or evoked over and over again in our popular media and arts. Communities remember not just the sexual violence experienced by their members, but also those who chose 'death over dishonour.'

Amnesties are thought to foster reconciliation, but in the case of gender violence, they simply create an uneasy denial. Physical and sexual abuse leave the victim with a sense of betrayal, with mental health challenges like depression, with lowered self-esteem – all of which predispose them to expect and accept abuse. For the conflict-displaced, other losses exacerbate this alienation. Where do they belong? To what rights and protections can they lay claim? Who will speak for them?

The terms of a peace settlement are the foundations of the post-conflict polity. While the international community has recognized the insidiousness of gender violence and the importance of including women in the peace process, these general principles do not always translate into concrete measures. Will gender violence be investigated and tried during the post-conflict transition? Will new institutions reflect the gender-sensitivity of the international regimes that address them? Will the new post-conflict polity begin by providing justice to the large number of women that will have surely experienced gender violence during conflict and displacement? Will it treat gender violence during conflict as a different beast from gender violence in 'normal' times, treating one as unremarkable and the other as heinous? A peace settlement and post-conflict dispensation which do not take seriously the impact of gender violence on people's lives and psyches, would make for a dispensation that reinforced the distrust and alienation of those who survived the violence to live within its jurisdiction.

"Few women testified about rape, and fewer named the rapists. It was as if the rapist and the raped were working together in bizarre collusion."³³

As you think about this and glance across a map of the world, you find scarcely a corner where conflict has not increased the incidence of gender violence or caused displacement, nor an instance where displacement has not created such insecurity for women, girls and boys.

This discussion about gender violence and peace-building takes us back to very old questions about peace and justice. Justice requires truth and reconciliation is facilitated by amnesty. Truth about gender violence hangs in the air—who perpetrated violence, when, where, how—haphazardly investigated and ignored out of discomfort. If punishment is seen as divisive, lack of punishment can snowball into a desire for revenge. Punishment is also justice. And yet, what can punishment fix for a person who has been forced into marriage or raped (or both)?

Peacemakers often prioritize the need for reconciliation and healing over punishment that cannot repair. Denial and silence add disempowerment to trauma, forgiveness coming more easily when the abuse and violence have been directed mostly at women. The new understanding of the post-conflict era is predicated on victims' tacit consent to silence.

We are left searching, once again, for a middle path. Peacebuilders have to contend with this moral dilemma that reconciliation can come at the cost of justice for those who have been wounded. Lawmakers must seek the delicate balance between ending impunity and not allowing it to descend into blame-games and campaigns for revenge. Social activists must facilitate a climate where those who speak out are neither glorified as a sop for their subsequent neglect nor ostracised for having survived violence to tell the tale. A social contract depending on denial and silence about gender violence or violence against women is an imperfect social contract with a short life-span. It is also unjust, asking of (mostly) women and girls, that they turn a blind eye to violence on a scale that would be unacceptable in any other demographic. Gender violence is a messy, painful reality that, ignored or condoned, can undermine the best-negotiated settlement and best-drafted constitutions.

³³ Antjie Krog, op.cit., 207.