

# Introduction

by Thoraya Ahmed Obaid

**I have the great pleasure of introducing this special issue of *Forced Migration Review*. This edition builds on the momentum generated by the International Symposium on Sexual Violence in Conflict and Beyond, convened in June 2006 in Brussels by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the Government of Belgium and the European Commission.**

Throughout history, violence against women has been accepted as an inevitable if unfortunate feature of conflict. This is now changing. While such violence continues to be inflicted on a massive scale, it is now recognised as a threat to development, peace and security; a violation of human rights; and a crime under international law. The challenge confronting the international community is whether all parties can make the prevention, treatment and prosecution of sexual violence a priority.

Our current inability to protect women and girls in conflict and post-conflict settings represents a human rights failure of massive proportions. Some 40,000 cases of war-related rape were reported during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Between 23,000 and 45,000 Kosovar Albanian women were reportedly raped in 1998 to 1999 at the height of the conflict with Serbia. In Rwanda, 39% of women surveyed reported being raped during the genocide and, in one study, two in three women who were raped were HIV-positive. In Burundi, 19% of a sample of women reported being raped.

Unfortunately, these cases are not the exception. Similar horrific data are reported wherever there is conflict. And behind each statistic is a human being – a woman who needs support to heal and reintegrate into her family and community. Yet all too often survivors are subjected to discrimination and stigma, which only compound the suffering they have already endured.

It is now recognised that sexual violence during and after conflict

is not inevitable, can be prevented and must be treated. There is no shortage of good practices but these are not being carried out at the scale and scope needed. Greater political will and leadership are needed to ensure an effective response.

Far stronger action is needed for prevention – from curtailing the trade in small arms to protecting women as they gather food and firewood, from designing safe shelters and camps to promoting good governance and the rule of law. In the UN, we need stronger enforcement of the code of conduct against sexual abuse and exploitation.

UNFPA seeks to ensure that healthcare professionals are trained to provide medical treatment and possess the necessary drugs, supplies and equipment. Adequate care for survivors includes documentation of the attack, collection of forensic evidence, a full medical examination, treatment for injuries and possible infection, emergency contraception or post-exposure prophylaxis where appropriate to prevent unwanted pregnancy and HIV

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infection, and follow-up care. We need routine implementation of the minimum initial service package for reproductive health services (an internationally-agreed set of activities that must be implemented in a coordinated manner by



appropriately trained staff<sup>1</sup>), and increased access to legal and psychosocial services for survivors.

It is absolutely essential that medical personnel, police, security, judges, lawyers, peacekeeping and humanitarian personnel be trained to recognise and respond to gender-based violence. It is critical that all sectors work together to create an environment that stops the victimisation of women and supports survivors. Unless post-conflict economies are rehabilitated quickly, and women have access to livelihoods, they will continue to be vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, whether in the family or the wider community. It is also the case that more women decision makers are needed in the currently male-dominated arenas of security and humanitarian response to ensure that the needs and perspectives of women are addressed.

Today, unfortunately, most proposals to address gender-based violence in conflict and post-conflict situations continue to go unfunded by the donor community – and women are paying the price. To raise awareness and facilitate stronger action, UNFPA, the European Commission and the Government of Belgium organised the International Symposium on Sexual Violence in Conflict and Beyond in June 2006.

This historic three-day conference brought together more than 250 participants from 30 countries – heads of UN agencies and NGOs, human activists and researchers, government ministers, doctors and other field-based humanitarian workers, parliamentarians, representatives from the International Criminal Court, military and police officers, and members of the media – to share experiences and strategies and forge a renewed commitment to end sexual violence in countries torn apart by war.

On the final day of the symposium, delegates adopted the Brussels Call to Action. It outlines 21 actions, from ending impunity for perpetrators to developing and funding national actions plans, and calls on governments, international organisations and civil society to prioritise the issue of sexual violence in all humanitarian, peacebuilding

and development efforts in countries affected by conflict.<sup>2</sup>

Since the Symposium, important steps have been taken in several countries that sent delegations to participate. In Liberia, a National Gender-Based Violence Plan of Action was articulated by the National Task Force, which is proving to be an effective coordinating mechanism between the Government of Liberia, national and international NGOs, UN agencies and other multi-sectoral stakeholders. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, new legislation was adopted that expanded the definition of rape and sexual violence, and strengthened the penal procedure.

Sadly, since the time of the Symposium, the security and political situation in Darfur has continued to deteriorate. Women and girls are experiencing unacceptable abuse, while the international community

has yet to prove its determination to bring their suffering to an end. The situation in Darfur is yet another pressing cry for the international community to incorporate prevention, protection and care for survivors of sexual violence in all aspects of humanitarian assistance. It reminds us of the imperative to work in joint initiatives, rather than in parallel but unconnected efforts. A number of UN agencies are today starting to work together to intensify their efforts in combating sexual violence and to bring a more intensive, collaborative and effective response.

It is my hope that this special issue of *Forced Migration Review* will shed light on the necessity to address sexual violence as a crime, a humanitarian emergency and a major challenge to all development efforts. Far from being a specific niche issue, sexual violence is an indicator of the most severe breach of human security. As the articles in this issue explain, it is closely related to food aid, firewood collection and HIV/AIDS. It directly affects women and girls but also men and boys – and destroys the fabric of families and communities. Punishing its perpetrators would contribute to restoring trust in the judicial system. Preventing it would spare disproportionate human and financial costs to reconstructing nations. Reducing sexual violence in all war-affected countries will be a true sign of national recovery.

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1. [www.unfpa.org/emergencies/manual/2.htm](http://www.unfpa.org/emergencies/manual/2.htm)
2. See back cover.

*A 13-year-old girl, raped by armed men, waits for treatment in a health clinic in Goma, eastern DRC, August 2006.*



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