Office of the United Nations
Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict

Report of
Workshop on
Sexual Violence against Men and Boys in Conflict Situations
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Women, Peace and Security agenda has had considerable success in drawing attention to the issue of sexual violence against women and girls in conflict situations, but has been silent on the related question of conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys. Despite mounting evidence that this is a major issue in a number of conflict situations around the globe, such violence continues to be under-reported, under-documented and under-acknowledged, thereby preventing victims from being availed much needed assistance and from accessing justice. Cognizant of the need for policies and practices that offer appropriate responses to men and boy survivors, and that challenge deeply entrenched cultural assumptions about male invulnerability to such violence, the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Sexual Violence in Conflict convened a workshop of experts to discuss the major dimensions to be brought into consideration, as well as to map out recommendations for ways forward.

In considering the scope of the problem, the workshop highlighted examples of sexual violence against men and boys in at least 25 countries since the turn of the century, and the fact that members of armed groups and forces are themselves also vulnerable. A multiplicity of forms of such violence were highlighted, ranging from anal rape through being coerced into committing various sexual acts, to also include forms of genital mutilation. The multiplicity of possible spaces in which such violence occurs was highlighted, as was the need to be aware of the ways in which conflict-related sexual violence continues in situations of exile, as well as in what are officially post-conflict contexts. While the majority of perpetrators are believed to be men, it was also acknowledged that women can also be actively involved. It was also seen that sexual violence against men and boys builds on the same gender constructs as are evident in sexual violence against women and girls, and that the ‘feminization’ of men through sexual violence is an extension of the larger gender logic that informs the subordination of women. Such sexual violence is frequently used as a weapon of war with the intent of fracturing communities and reducing their capacity to resist, and gender humiliation is frequently linked to ethnic humiliation.

In exploring the impacts and consequences of conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys, the discussion focused on the five ‘Ps’: physical, psychological, psycho-sexual, psycho-social, and political. It thus made clear how the consequences spread beyond the individual to create domestic and social dysfunction. The discussion thus emphasized the need to consider responses that work not only with the individual victim or survivor, but also his partner, family, and community.

In considering these impacts and the distinctive needs they create, the workshop considered key similarities and differences between conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys, and that against women. Most striking in this regard was the manner in which male victims are frequently coerced into active involvement in sexual violence against other men and women, as well as being coerced to harm themselves genitally through particular sexual acts with objects. When comparing how such violence relates to and differs from the better documented and understood sexual abuse against boys, the public nature of much conflict-related sexual violence was contrasted to the secretive nature of most sexual abuse, and the very distinct nature of the relationship between perpetrator and victim (as compared to trusted family member or friend in situations of child abuse) was also discussed.

While the above discussions highlighted some particular gaps in responses to conflict-related sexual violence, participants also considered the broad challenges of addressing the issue; many of the existing documents related to Gender-Based Violence focus exclusively on women and girls, leaving practitioners in field settings with virtually no guidance on how to work with men and boys. This is
aggravated by wide-spread discomfort working on issues that are perceived to relate in one way or another to sexuality and sexual orientation.

Moving from direct service provision to the longer-term agenda of legal responses and the fight against impunity, the failure of many domestic legal frameworks to recognize men as potential victims of sexual violence was noted alongside the chilling effect on reporting of penal codes that fail to distinguish between consensual and non-consensual homosexual activity. International criminal law, as developed through the major international criminal tribunals for Yugoslavia and Rwanda in particular, and as synthesized in the Rome statute of the International Criminal Court, provides the most comprehensive framework for addressing this issue, supported by a range of human rights treaties and mechanisms, particularly those in defense of the rights to life, personal security, physical integrity, freedom from torture, inhuman and degrading treatment, access to health and equal protection. Importantly, the ICC also recognizes the importance of coercion. To ensure that domestic jurisdictions are able to address conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys it is thus essential to harmonize domestic frameworks in line with international best practice.

The prospects of traditional or customary justice systems being able to address the issue of sexual violence against men was given consideration, but, given its tendency to be patriarchal in structure and outlook, the mechanisms of truth-telling, reparations and institutional reform offered by transitional justice appeared to offer stronger prospects of redress to male victims.

The report makes 29 specific recommendations, grouped under five main headings:

a) Determining the scope of sexual violence against men and boys, notably through increased screening and documentation of three key populations (refugees, combatants, detainees)

b) Developing survivor-centered responses to men and boy survivors that begin with the individual, but when appropriate also work with families, households and communities, and encourage survivors in the establishment of self-help associations

c) Mainstreaming male-inclusive understandings of and approaches to GBV within the humanitarian community, with immediate attention to revising key guidelines and training instruments

d) Building on international momentum in the form of new resource allocations, strengthened communities of practice, and stronger statements of international commitment to addressing the issue

e) Enabling survivors to access justice, and strengthening domestic and international capacity to hold perpetrators to account, principally through aligning domestic and regional frameworks with international best-practice, as established in the Rome Statute

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