

# Unheard Voices: Just Another Victim

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Most of the world's refugees - a staggering 80% - are women and their dependent children. Yet despite their presence in such vast proportions in the global refugee population, women remain the forgotten majority, a wail of unheard voices, unnoticed victims, a rollcall of numbers.

The outrageous silence intensifies when it stills as well the cries from female refugees subjected to an almost unique abuse: rape. In times of unrest and war, rape often becomes an instrument of war on a par with scorch and burn. Throughout history, enemy soldiers have swarmed through the homelands of the vanquished, subduing the population and raping every female they encountered, including tiny girls and white-haired grannies.

Usually when this happens, the vanquished men, the leaders of the overrun country, howl in collective misery and label the endemic sexual violence a conspiracy to destroy their national pride and honor. When German troops marched through Belgium during World War I, they raped so systematically, and the Franco-Belgian propaganda machine spewed so expertly, that The Rape of the Hun became a dominant metaphor. Afterward, in peace time, propaganda analysts dismissed these mass rapes as rhetoric designed to whip up British and American support. In face of new political realities, the Rape of the Hun had lost its propaganda value. It had become merely the individual tragedies of thousands of women, and no longer mattered - except, of course, to its silenced victims.

In wartime, women are raped by ordinary youths as casually or as savagely as a village is pillaged or destroyed. Sexual trespass on the enemy's women is to a soldier one of the satisfactions of conquest, for once he is handed a rifle and told to kill, he becomes an adrenaline-charged young man with permission to kick in the door, to grab, to steal, to boot the vanquished in the face, to give vent to his suppressed rage against all women who belong to other men. Each time a woman is raped, it saps the collective spirit of all women and of the nation. This is the case in the former Yugoslavia and in Somalia, where mass rape leaves bitter reminders long after the troops have departed. And if a woman who is a victim of wartime rape survives the assault, how do her people treat her later, when that war is over?

During World War II, when German soldiers were again on the march, they committed atrocious rapes on Russian and Jewish women in the occupied villages and cities, and dragged other women off to forced service in brothels, or to death.

In the Pacific, in 1937, the Japanese occupation of Nanking, China's war time capital, was accomplished with such freewheeling sexual violence that it became known as The Rape Nanking. And astounding though it seems, it was not until this year that Korean "comfort women" overcame their shame sufficiently to talk about how they, in World War II, were coerced into playing the role of sexual conscripts for the Japanese Army.

No matter how often such mass rapes occur, they are always described as "unprecedented". In 1971, when Pakistanis methodically violated the women of newly independent Bangladesh, the indignant Bangladesh government denounced the rapes as "unprecedented" in their appeals for international aid to help with the aftermath. They even went so far as to praise the raped women as Heroines of Independence, and permitted them to secure abortions. When the victims returned to their own villages, however, they were ostracized by their own men.

In the current crisis in the former Yugoslavia, thousands of unwanted babies have already been born conceived through rape by soldiers. A preliminary report by a team of investigators from the European Community estimates about 20,000 victims. Amnesty International has found that abuses against women, including rape, have been widespread. In some cases, the rapes are so organized that women are deliberately detained so that they can be raped and otherwise sexually abused.

A significant number of the refugee women who entered Canada in the past decade have been subjected to torture, starvation, terrorism, humiliation and mutilation simply because they were women. If they were not women but men, if they were members of any other caste or group, their treatment would be recognized as a civil and political emergency and as a gross defilement of humanity. Yet despite the clear record of abuse, women's rights are not understood or classified as human rights, and it is impossible to overstate the grave consequences this has on the fundamental issues of women's lives.

In many cases, their sexual violation intensifies the suffering of female victims who, alongside their men, are subjected to deliberate and arbitrary killing, detention, and torture and ill-treatment. However, rape is an especially humiliating assault. It has traumatic social repercussions, which may be affected by the individual's cultural origins or social status. These women feel degraded and ashamed, and often fear that if they reveal what has been done to them, they will confront as well a social stigma so terrible they choose eternal silence as the more bearable option.

The International Community has the obligation and the responsibility to liberate the women, the mothers who are being humiliated by the evil minds who are rejoicing because they have achieved what they desired - to destroy the trust between nations and nationalities. Innocent lives are lost, dehumanized, and evil minds and evil forces, darker than fascism are getting the upper hand as is the case in Somalia, the former Yugoslavia, Sudan, Angola just to name a few. Rape and sexual abuse as forms of torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment are clearly in contravention of international human rights standards, as well as of international humanitarian law. It has been stated time and time again but whenever the issue of defending women and their dependents arises, laws and international human rights standards, the international human rights laws are tossed onto the back burner. Once again women and their dependents are denied the protection they need and deserve. Once again they have become unheard voices, unnoticed victims, a rollof of numbers.