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Statistical Information on Violence Against Women during the Civil War in Liberia

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ABSTRACT

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At the end of the 20th century dozens of countries are involved in violent conflicts. Only in the past decade has the international community begun to recognize and document sexual violence against women and girls during military conflict. Documenting sexual violence and human rights violations against women and girls presents a unique challenge, one that requires specific methodology different from those often used to document other human rights violations. Women's Rights International (WRI) uses participatory research methodology, working with groups of women in countries at war or who are living under state-sponsored violence. This paper discusses the methodology and outcome of a project with nurse midwives in Liberia that sheds light on a number of key accomplishments that, perhaps despite conventional wisdom, are possible to achieve:

Women from rural areas can design a survey and collect high-quality data about human rights violations against women in their own community in the midst of ongoing armed conflict.

Useful information about human rights abuses can be collected using a survey instrument developed for a specific conflict in a specific country.

Statistical information about human rights violations can be disseminated to a wide audience, including rural women in villages as well as people working in government agencies and international organizations and tribunals.

RESUME

L'information statistique sur la violence à l'égard des femmes pendant la guerre civile au Liberia

En cette fin de 20ème siècle, des dizaines de pays sont le théâtre de violents conflits. La communauté internationale a attendu la dernière décennie pour enfin reconnaître et documenter la violence sexuelle contre les femmes et les jeunes filles pendant les conflits armés. Le fait de documenter la violence sexuelle et les violations des droits de l'homme contre les femmes et les



jeunes filles constitue un défi unique qui requiert une méthodologie spécifique différente de celles fréquemment utilisées pour documenter d'autres violations des droits de l'homme. Women's Rights International (WRI) utilise la méthodologie de la recherche participative en travaillant avec des groupes de femmes dans des pays en guerre ou qui vivent en étant soumises à une violence cautionnée par l'Etat. Cet exposé traite de la méthodologie et des résultats d'un projet avec des infirmières sages-femmes au Liberia qui jette la lumière sur un nombre de réalisations clefs qu'il est possible d'obtenir peut-être en dépit d'une prudence conventionnelle:

Les femmes des régions rurales peuvent concevoir une observation et recueillir des données de grande qualité sur les violations des droits de l'homme contre les femmes au sein de leur propre communauté et au beau milieu du conflit armé en cours.

Une information pertinente sur les abus des droits de l'homme peut être recueillie en utilisant un outil d'observation développé pour un conflit spécifique dans un pays spécifique.

L'information statistique sur les violations des droits de l'homme peut être diffusée à une large audience, y compris aux femmes des villages et aux personnes travaillant dans les agences gouvernementales, les organisations internationales et les tribunaux.

1. Documenting Violence Against Women During Conflict

At the end of the 20th century dozens of countries in the world, nearly 30 percent of the UN member states, are involved in violent conflicts and wars (NDCF, 1999). These conflicts have resulted in 13.5 million refugees and more than 17 million internally displaced people worldwide (USCR, 1998), and the majority of these people are women and children (UNHCR, 1999). Compared with the estimated 5 percent civilian casualty rate in World War I, in some countries up to 90 percent of war casualties in 1990 were civilians, as in Liberia (Sivard, 1991). This dramatic increase in civilian casualties is in part the result of the increasing deliberate and systematic violence against whole populations in wars waged between ethnic groups (Swiss & Giller, 1993). Sexual assaults against women and children have been used as a military strategy in some of these conflicts and the consequences of that sexual violence are detrimental to women's health, economic status, and human rights.

Only in the past decade has the international community begun to recognize and document sexual violence against women and girls during military conflict (Swiss & Giller, 1993). During that time period we have seen significant changes in the international community's judicial response. Rape is treated as a separate crime in the International Tribunals on the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda (United Nations, 1993; International Herald Tribune, April 11, 2000, p. 4). As the definition of torture in international law has evolved to include rape, rape can now also be prosecuted as torture in the International Tribunals, which recognize rape as a serious war crime (Organization of American States, 1995).

Documenting sexual violence and human rights violations against women presents a unique challenge, one that requires specific methodology different from those often used to document other human rights violations such as murder. Reporting the experience of rape and sexual abuse carries with it a different impact on the woman and her community, depending on the attitudes of the individual, her family members, and her culture. While a woman may be willing to report the killing of her family members, she may be reluctant to admit that she was raped. Women's Rights International (WRI) was founded with the specific purpose of developing methodologies that can accurately document and address human rights violations against women. WRI works with groups of rural women in countries at war or who are living under state-sponsored violence. We incorporate documentation with program development using participatory research to build momentum from the initial discovery of a problem to finding specific solutions to building a larger movement for social change. In participatory research, the research questions are chosen by the



women who are affected by the problem under study, and a survey is designed and conducted by the women themselves. The participatory research also supports education and advocacy to increase awareness and to encourage agencies concerned with health, human rights, refugees, relief, and development in war-torn countries to support locally designed participatory projects addressing violence against women. We work with local, national, and international groups to share skills and strategies. WRI uses action research and statistical methodology as a means to promote better understanding of the effects of violence in armed conflict and the importance of documenting those effects as a tool for prevention and change.

In 1994, Women's Rights International began a collaboration with the Women's Health and Development Program (WHDP) at the Mother Patern College of Health Sciences in Monrovia, Liberia. In that country almost half of the population was internally displaced or became refugees in neighboring Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, and Sierra Leone as a consequence of the civil war that began in 1989. WRI and WHDP collaborated to develop research tools that focused on documenting women's experiences during the war, including sexual violence and coercion, and the reproductive health and economic impact of war on women's lives. In addition, this newly developed program aimed to find innovative ways to support Liberian women in dealing with the effects of physical and sexual violence in their lives. A survey was conducted in neighborhoods, markets, internally displaced persons' camps, and high schools, where community researchers interviewed 205 Liberian women. The results of this study were used to develop a training manual that uses storytelling and role-playing to help community leaders in Liberia bring women together to address physical and sexual violence in their lives.

The survey was an important component of the project because it documented the frequency of rape and sexual coercion, demonstrated how widespread was violence against women, identified the population groups who experienced rape, delineated the conditions that encouraged or inhibited rape and violence against women, and made stronger the links between the consequences of violence and reproductive health. Discussing the methodology and outcome of the Liberia project sheds light on a number of key accomplishments that, perhaps despite conventional wisdom, are possible to achieve:

1Rural women can design a survey and collect high-quality data about human rights violations in their own community in the midst of ongoing armed conflict.

2Useful information about human rights abuses can be collected using a survey instrument developed for a specific conflict in a specific country.

3Statistical information about human rights violations can be disseminated to a wide audience, including rural women in villages as well as people working in government agencies and international organizations and tribunals.

2. Tailoring Research Methodology to the Purpose For Collecting Information

One of the first issues that must be addressed when documenting human rights violations is whether to collect the information during the ongoing conflict or to wait until the conflict is over. Each option has risks. Collecting information during armed conflict presents significant safety risks to everyone involved, especially if local people collect the data and report the violations. Security problems, military curfews, and other war-related complications will always interfere with the implementation and outcomes of a project undertaken in the middle of an ongoing conflict. This does not mean that it should not be done, but it does mean that additional security precautions and safety measures must be taken. If one of the team's goals is to document the impact of war on the lives of women, efforts to collect this data while the conflict is continuing can be supported. By collecting the information immediately, the data may be more accurate and more useful. Women may be more willing to report violations in the midst of conflict because the violations represent



current concerns that need immediate attention. It may be the case that women are less interested and less willing to talk about what they experienced during the war once the war is over. It has been our experience in other situations that people who have experienced rape and sexual coercion during war are less and less willing to discuss them as time passes. Some women feel that they want to put the past behind them and avoid talking about their experiences during a war that is finally over. In addition, the protracted nature of many of these conflicts that continue for many years to decades makes it irresponsible to wait until the conflict is over and it is "safe" to set up much needed programs for women who could have benefited from them earlier.

Once the decision has been made to collect information about violence against women during war, one must tailor the research methodology to the purpose for which the data will be used. One purpose may be to collect specific information about crimes and perpetrators in order to seek justice through international tribunals. If this kind of detailed information is what is wanted, international interviewers may be best suited to collect data and then leave the country where they can immediately publish it with little risk to their own lives. Another purpose may be to incorporate the research into a local effort to document the impact of war on women's lives. In this case, local women are best suited to design and conduct the survey, and special precautions must be taken to protect the safety of those women and the women they interview. This type of survey might not ask for the identities of fighting factions or for details of when and where the violent events occurred. In some situations, members of the fighting factions may be living in the communities being surveyed. This kind of survey can establish the scope and scale of sexual and physical violence against women during a war, but will not identify specific factions or perpetrators for international tribunals. If a local team collects the data, it is also imperative that they remain in control of what is done with the data and when it is done. It is important that donor partners and international organizations that support these programs understand that it may be many years before it may be safe for local people to release some of the information collected and that this delay may be in conflict with the international organizations and donors expectations and needs.

Each of these different purposes for collecting data requires an entirely different methodology. The decision about the purpose for collecting data impacts each stage of research: survey design, data collection, statistical analysis and interpretation, and information dissemination. In the following sections we will discuss our experience in working with a group of Liberian women to document the impact of war on their lives.

3. Context: The Liberian Civil Conflict

The Liberian civil conflict began in December 1989 when the National Patriotic Front of Liberia, led by Charles Taylor, crossed into Liberia from Cote d'Ivoire to overthrow the government of Samuel Doe. Ethnic tensions that had increased under Doe's rule fueled the fighting. Ten months after the war began, Doe was dead, a regional peacekeeping force was in Monrovia and the National Patriotic Front of Liberia had been pushed out of Monrovia. During the war, there were seven different fighting groups, including the Doe government's Armed Forces of Liberia. Monrovia, under the relative protection of a regional West African peacekeeping force after August 1990, was, nevertheless, under attack from July to November 1990, October 1992, and April 1996. In July 1997, Charles Taylor was elected president, ending more than seven years of civil conflict (Human Rights Watch/Africa, 1997).

Much of the fighting occurred in the rural areas of Liberia. Nearly half of Liberia's 2.5 million people were forced to flee their homes at least once during the civil conflict (US Foreign Disaster Assistance, 1991), giving Liberia the largest

percentage of refugees and internally displaced people of any country in the world. Liberians who fled to Monrovia lived in and traveled through parts of the country that were under the control of one or more factions before they reached Monrovia and the relative protection of a West African peacekeeping force (from Swiss, et al., 1998).

4. Survey Design: Action-Oriented Research

In the effort to collect statistics on human rights violations that include sexual violence, there has been some interest in attempting to design and use rapid or standard instruments for documenting rape and sexual assault during armed conflict. These uniform instruments might be used by organizations who go into refugee communities to assess the extent and nature of human rights violations against women. These rapid or standard assessments have one significant logistical advantage: They can be done rapidly. But the advantage of a rapid uniform survey must be weighed against the potential loss of data accuracy. It is our experience that more accurate information can be collected using survey instruments designed by local women who know the culture of the community being surveyed. Surveys that fail to use culturally appropriate wording or context-specific items may suffer from serious sample bias, high non-response rate, validity problems and may fail to accurately reflect the extent and impact of human rights violations against women. In addition, local women who remain in the area can formulate community responses to the issues of sexual violence covered in the survey.

One of the key components of the research in Liberia was that Liberian women designed the survey from start to finish, rather than simply translating an existing survey into Liberian English or an ethnic language. They decided what aspects of Liberian women's experiences they wanted to document after holding small group discussions with market women, high school girls, and women and girls living in displaced persons' camps or urban neighborhoods in Monrovia. They chose the survey topics and wrote the specific questions used to collect information on those topics. Because the data were collected in one-on-one interviews between Liberian women, the interviewees' experiences were not filtered through a foreign perspective. The quality and validity of data that we were able to collect was dependent on the Liberian interviewers' knowledge and understanding of the meaning of the information they collected.

One example of the kind of context-specific information we were able to collect about sexual violence during the Liberian civil conflict was that being taken and forced to cook for a fighter or soldier was a tremendous risk factor for sexual assault and coercion. When the Liberian interviewers were designing their survey questions, they met with small groups of Liberian women to try to ascertain the range of experiences that women reported. They discovered that when women crossed checkpoints or when fighters took control of a village, some women were forced to cook for a soldier or fighter. By including a survey item that asked whether the woman was forced to cook for a soldier or fighter, the Liberian women were able to document that being forced to cook for a soldier or fighter was associated with being subjected to his control in a variety of ways including sexual violence. The experience of forced domestic service also included a very high risk for being raped, experiencing attempted rape, or for sexual coercion (Figure 1). This particular pattern of sexual assault in association with forced service may be unique to the practices of soldiers and fighters in the Liberian civil war. Other wars have other characteristics and practices that are unique to them and present unique risks to women. Only by designing a survey that reflects women's experiences in that particular conflict can these risk factors for human rights violations against women and children be accurately identified and documented.

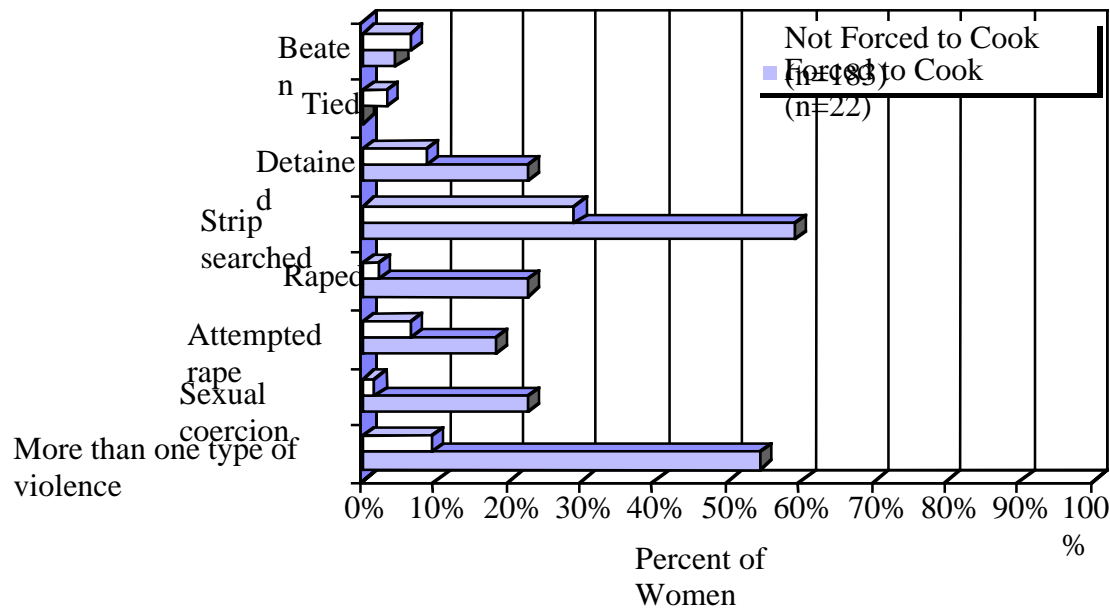


Figure 1. Percent of women who experienced physical and sexual violence according to whether or not they were forced to cook for a soldier or fighter.

5. Survey Design: Wording of Survey Items

Documenting human rights violations and sexual violence against women requires that "outsiders" are able to put some preconceived definitions aside. The cultural context of the survey designer has a direct impact on the nature and quality of the data that can be collected. A survey designed from outside the cultural viewpoint of the people surveyed can skew information into a particular definitional framework that may not be appropriate for a given setting. In the Liberia project, we tried to collect information about sexual violence during armed conflict that was representative of the specific context in which it was collected, yet objective and detailed enough to be understood in any context in which the data might be used. These definitional issues were paramount in influencing the design of the survey and the wording of the survey items.

The first issue that had to be clarified was how to ask Liberian women whether they had been raped. In small group discussions with Liberian women in a variety of communities we discovered that there was no common agreement about the meaning of the word "rape." To some women, a woman could define a sexual assault as rape only if it resulted in visible injury. To other women, only an unmarried woman could define a sexual assault as rape. If a married woman was assaulted, it would not be defined as rape. In this setting, a simple survey item using the word "rape" (e.g., "Were you raped?") would result in a number of cases where a woman who had been forced to have sex against her will would answer "no" to that question. Because "force" was the most common word that women would use when talking about rape, the survey item in this case was written as, "Did any soldier, fighter, or [peacekeeper] force you to have sex with him when you didn't want to?" We also discovered from the small group discussions that Liberian women experienced sexual violence during the civil conflict along a continuum, with forced sex at one extreme and sexual relationships with soldiers or fighters that the women described as "voluntary" at the other extreme. The extreme conditions of war created a situation where some women entered into sexual relationships with soldiers or fighters as a way to gain protection and support during the war. In some cases, the women identified these relationships as a means of surviving the war. In other cases women defined these relationships as consensual love relationships. By collecting these data about sexual relationships with soldiers or fighters, one can document the impact of war on the women's lives without relying on one particular frame of reference about what defines sexual coercion. What

one person calls coercion, another may not. We wanted to know how women's lives were changed because of the war. Our goal was to document how many women were in sexual relationships with soldiers or fighters and how the women defined these relationships. These relationships constitute a significant impact of the war.

By designing the survey items with careful attention to wording, using the words and concepts that Liberian women themselves used to talk about sexual relationships, we were able to collect data that we might otherwise have missed if we had only focused on terminology such as "rape" or "force." If we had asked only about "rape" we would have missed those women who defined rape as only outside of marriage or only if physical injury occurs. If we had only asked about "forced" sex, we would have missed information about coercive sexual relationships or "voluntary" sexual relationships with soldiers or fighters.

Another aspect of survey design that was impacted by listening to Liberian women's concerns was modifying a standard technique for documenting reproductive health to capture the experiences and intuition of the Liberian women themselves. In small group discussions, one recurring observation that some Liberian women made was that increasing numbers of young women were pregnant during the war. "It seemed like every teenager in the village was pregnant." We expanded the standard practice of documenting the number of live births and miscarriages to document the total number of pregnancies a woman had. By including in the survey a table that documented each pregnancy and the outcome of the pregnancy, we were able to see an increase in pregnancies during the war. While the absolute birth rate did not change, the percentage of pregnancies that resulted in live births dropped significantly during the war because the percentage of pregnancies that ended in miscarriage, abortion, or stillbirth had increased. If we had not asked about the number of pregnancies, we would have missed the increased rate of missing pregnancies during the war.

6. Information Dissemination: Multiple Formats

Action research has the specific goal of documenting information that is useful not only at an international level, but at a local level as well. These multiple audiences for the results obtained using action research techniques requires flexibility in the formats in which the data are disseminated. The manner in which statistical information is presented must be tailored to the specific needs of different audiences. Information about the prevalence of specific types of violence against women during armed conflict may be communicated to government and international agencies using bar charts (Figure 2) or complex tables. That same information may also be communicated to rural women who are not literate using more representative formats such as density plots (Figure 3) or drawings.

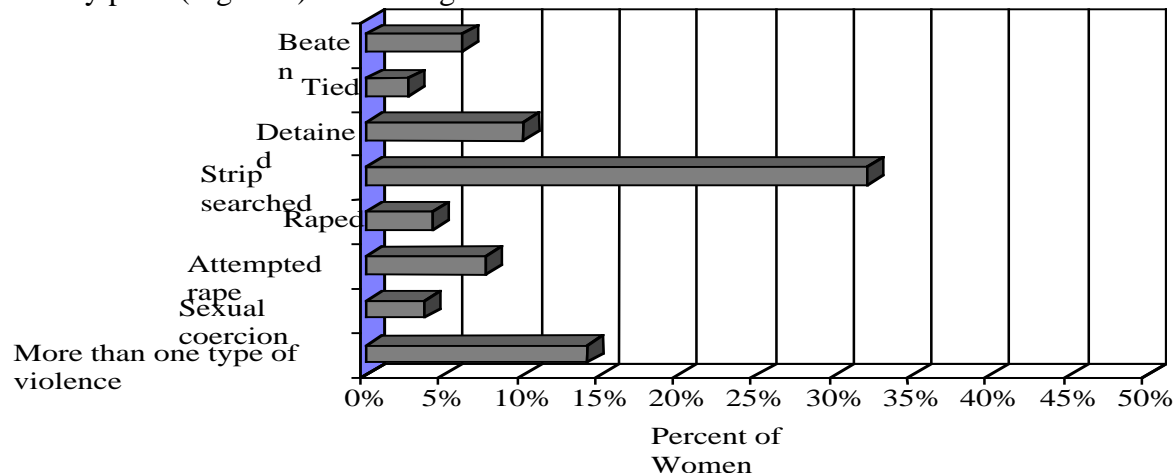


Figure 2. Percent of Liberian women who experienced different types of physical and sexual violence.

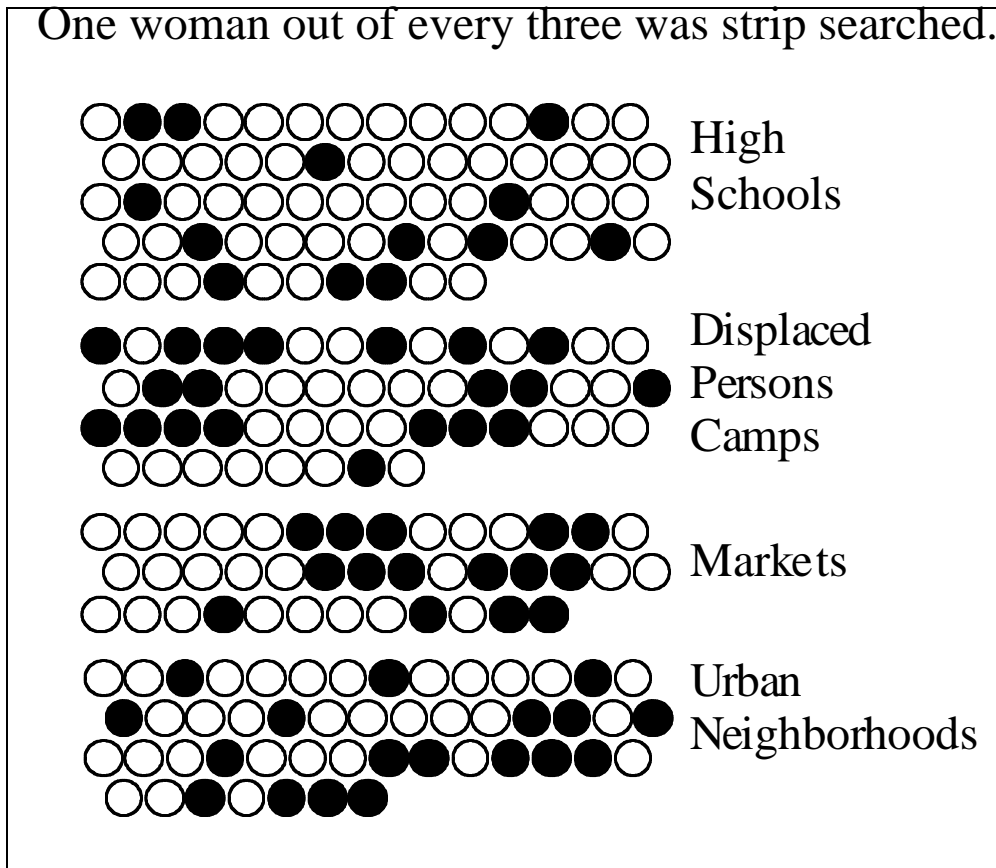


Figure 3. Density plot depicting the number of Liberian women surveyed who were strip searched during the civil conflict.

In order to communicate the results of the survey to women living in rural Liberian villages who do not read or write, we developed a story methodology for communicating central tendency information about the typical experiences of Liberian women in the four settings we surveyed in Monrovia: high schools, markets, displaced persons camps, and urban communities.

We constructed composite characters, settings, and experiences using the most common survey responses of women from each site. From these characters, the Liberian women who constructed the survey wrote stories using the statistical information to tell the story of what happened to the character. For example, the results of the survey showed that young women were more likely than older women to experience sexual violence, but older women were more likely to experience physical violence and strip search. One way to communicate this finding is to use a bar graph (Figure 4). This finding is communicated to rural women by using two different story characters, one young and one older. In one story, an older woman character experiences a strip search at a checkpoint. In another story, a young woman character listens while a friend tells her that she was forced into a sexual relationship with a soldier to support her family.

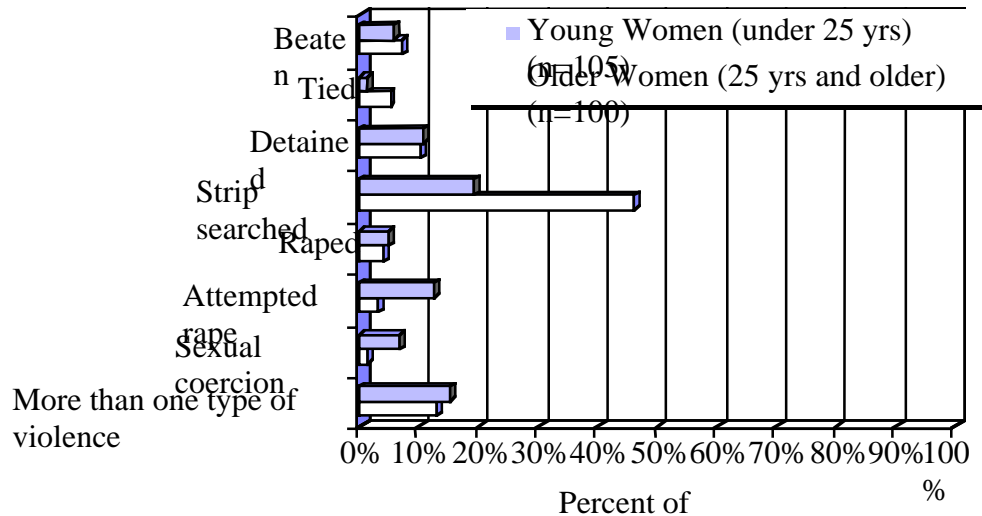


Figure 4. Percent of women who experienced physical and sexual violence according to their age group.

7. Summary and Conclusions

In summary, documenting human rights violations against women during ongoing conflict requires careful consideration of the purposes for collecting the data, because those purposes directly influence the design, implementation, and dissemination of the research. Using a participatory approach to collecting information about human rights violations requires enduring commitment, engenders significant risks, but also has the potential for positive, lasting, and sustainable changes at the local level. The goal after all is for there to be women on every continent who have had the opportunity to document themselves, their situations, and create their own unique responses to violence against women. These women are then perfectly placed to share their approach and their skills with other women in their region, their country, and around the world.

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