



Violence against Women in Times of War: A Research Study in Liberia

Women's Rights International

At the end of the 20th century, dozens of countries are involved in violent conflicts and wars. 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 (Sivard 1991). This dramatic change is in part the result of deliberate and systematic violence against entire populations in wars that are increasingly waged between ethnic groups. Consequently, today there are more than 30 million refugees and internally displaced people worldwide, the majority of whom are women and children (USCR 1998). In Liberia, nearly half the population became internally displaced or fled to neighboring Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, and Sierra Leone as a result of the civil war that began in 1989.

In some conflicts, sexual assaults against women and children have been used as a strategy of war. Although sexual violence against women and girls during military conflict violates their human rights and negatively impacts their health and economic status, the international community has only recently begun to recognize and document the problem.¹ Further, there are not enough programs that address the needs of individuals and community members affected by sexual violence.

Founded in 1995, Women's Rights International (WRI), a U.S.-based nongovernmental organization (NGO), works in resource-poor settings to ensure freedom from violence for women living in countries that are at war or where state-sponsored violence occurs. In 1994, WRI joined with the Women's Health and Development Program (WHDP) at the Mother Patern College of Health Sciences in Monrovia, Liberia to examine women's experiences during the civil war, including sexual violence and coercion. In addition, the project considered ways to support Liberian women in dealing with the effects of physical and sexual violence on their lives.

Objectives

During 1997-98, WRI and WHDP conducted a study of Liberian women living in refugee camps in Côte d'Ivoire.² The project aimed to:

- ▶ Strengthen the skills of the WHDP in-country team in survey design and implementation, problem solving, decisionmaking, trust building, program management, and financial accountability;
- ▶ Document the prevalence of wartime violence against women and its impact on the daily lives of women refugees;
- ▶ Conduct advocacy and educational activities on violence during times of war with various groups, including study participants and Liberian women;
- ▶ Focus international attention on the pervasiveness of rape and

¹ The international community now considers rape during war to be a serious human rights violation, with International Tribunals on the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda defining it as a crime of war.

² This project stemmed from an earlier effort in 1994, when WRI and WHDP conducted a survey with 205 Liberian women in neighborhoods, markets, camps for internally displaced persons, and high schools. The results of this survey—the first population-based study of wartime violence against women—were used to develop a training manual that uses storytelling and role-playing to help traditional midwives in Liberia address issues of physical and sexual violence with women in their villages.

other crimes against women during war and encourage agencies concerned with health, human rights, and development to support related projects.

The Intervention

The project began with several fact-finding trips to two Côte d'Ivoire refugee camps by WRI and WHDP, during which the research team met with camp officials, received permission to conduct interviews, and talked with women in the camps. Following these visits, the team randomly selected households in

camp zones. Researchers then designed and conducted a survey on the experiences of women during the war that included the frequency of rape and sexual coercion, the conditions that encourage or inhibit rape and violence against women, and the links between the consequences of violence and reproductive health.

Data were collected through one-on-one interviews with 126 women.³ Finally, WRI and WHDP collaborated on analyzing both quantitative and qualitative findings in areas such as



social and economic conditions, reproductive health history, household economics, and work.

Results

We know what happened to our families, and now we can prove what we thought was true...[Research results] give us the raw materials to prove what happened to women during the war.

—WHDP research team member

Wartime Violence

Due to the sensitive nature of the research on violence against women during wartime, WRI and WHDP have decided to not release specific findings at this time.⁴ The research teams ask that donors and grantees understand that publicizing data prematurely could jeopardize the safety of the project participants. With this in mind, other aspects of the project are reported below.

Education and Economics

As expected, the onset of war had an enormous impact on women's educational and work status. The researchers found that 59 percent of the interviewees had

worked before the war started and 43 percent had been attending school. Although school was available free-of-charge in the camps, school attendance for women decreased to 25 percent after the war. In addition, the number of women refugees who neither worked nor attended school was 17 percent at the time of the interviews, up from 6 percent prior to the war.

The study also made clear that the economic self-sufficiency of Liberian women was compromised not only for the duration of their lives as refugees, but possibly for a long period after returning to a stable home country. Findings indicated that war and conflict significantly changed the nature of women's work. Prior to the outbreak of war in Liberia, most women farmed their own land, or engaged in small market activities to support themselves and their families. As refugees in Côte d'Ivoire they could no longer own land to farm, and had to work

for wages on Ivoirian farms instead. Because they were unable to own land and grow their own food, they were dependent on relief organizations and a limited income.

In addition to the loss of subsistence farming opportunities, household size also changed. Two-thirds of the women surveyed were heads of households in the camps. Further, far fewer women were managing households with the support of other women than is typical in a Liberian village.

Advocacy and Education

WRI/WHDP continue to focus international attention on the issue of violence against women during war, specifically through the dissemination of earlier project findings from Liberia.

Under the grant period for this project, data from research conducted in 1994 were analyzed and published in an article titled "Vio-

³ The average age of the interviewees was 29, with a range of 15-78 years. Eighty percent belonged to an ethnic group which had been targeted during the Liberian civil war—and most had lived as refugees in Côte d'Ivoire for more than six years.

⁴ For information on the data in the future, please contact WRI through the listing at the end of this brief.

lence against women during the Liberian civil conflict,” which appeared in the February 1998 edition of the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*. In addition, both that data and qualitative information were shared with the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women for inclusion in the 1998 report to the United Nations Human Rights Commission. WRI continues to maintain regular contact and share information on its work with the Special Rapporteur.

Participatory Action Research

The survey project was a consciousness-raising tool for Liberian team members. As [team members] wrote, tested,

and conducted the survey, their own understanding of violence against women broadened to include acts that some had not previously considered violations of their rights (e.g., domestic violence).

—Swiss et al. 1998

Accurate documentation of the scale of violence against women during the war in Liberia was possible because the women themselves were given the opportunity to define rape and sexual coercion in their own cultural context, and because such discussions were part of a larger survey of women’s health. In addition, the local team took the lead on questionnaire development and defined its research priorities. This trust in and delegation of

responsibility to the local team built confidence and empowered researchers, who also had time to develop awareness about stereotypes, prejudice, and violence against women.

Conclusions

Despite continued fighting in Liberia throughout the development of this project, WRI/WHDP’s work demonstrated that under the right conditions, women want to and will talk about sexual violence and coercion. In addition, the research team learned that it is possible to conduct a methodologically sound, population-based survey on the impact of war on women’s lives, and to thereby assess the degree of violent experiences among women and girls.

Recommendations and Lessons Learned

The study elucidated issues that can help guide similar efforts in the future:

► **Protect the safety of participants.** When conducting sensitive research in times of war, the safety of both researchers and participants must be ensured.⁵ Researchers in conflict zones should be given responsibility for making ethical decisions regarding the safety of participants and should understand the potentially harmful consequences of releasing their findings too soon.

► **Promote participatory action research.** The goal of participatory research should be to give women the opportunity to document their experiences and to create their own unique responses to violence. This approach can be effective even under difficult circumstances if research surveys are culturally

appropriate and context-specific, and that women’s own vocabulary for experiences relating to sexual violence is used. Local people should conduct the interviews in a sensitive manner and seek to protect the anonymity of participants.

► **Tailor successful methodology.** The WRI/WHDP team found it relatively easy to replicate the methods used to conduct its earlier (1994) survey. However, each survey instrument must be designed for particular situations. The local research team should seek to understand women’s diverse experiences. Women should take the lead on developing questionnaires, which should take into account the specific conflict, culture, and types of violence committed against women.

The WRI/WHDP research produced lessons from the work in both Liberia

and Côte d’Ivoire that may be useful for other projects:

► **Monitoring and evaluation are challenging.** It is complicated to develop and implement effective short-term monitoring and evaluation criteria during times of war. Although regular evaluations were carried out by the research team, attempts to develop and measure attitudinal and behavioral changes among program participants proved difficult due to the fluidity of refugee communities, ongoing security issues, and the time needed to change attitudes and behaviors. Adequate time and resources therefore need to be allotted to successfully monitor and evaluate programs that address such complex issues as sexual violence and war.

► **Local input determines impact.** Programs whose goals are to

⁵ Because the situation in Liberia and in the refugee camps was dangerous, additional security measures had to be employed to avoid compromising the safety of people who had already fled their homes to survive.

research the impact of war and sexual violence on refugee populations are often confronted with emerging tensions between the need for accurate documentation of

human rights violations on the one hand, and the needs of the individual survivors on the other. While health care professionals may be uniquely positioned to share valuable skills

(such as field research techniques), interventions will be successful only if local teams can design them according to their own needs, priorities, and knowledge of the situation.

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