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The Hidden Victims of Wartime Rape

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Los Angeles

AS disturbing new reports of male rape in Congo made clear, wartime sexual violence isn't limited to women and girls. But in its ongoing effort to eradicate rape during conflict, the United Nations continues to overlook a significant imperative: ending wartime sexual assault of men and boys as well.

Sexual violence against men does occasionally make the news: the photographs of the sexual abuse and humiliation of Iraqi men at the Abu Ghraib prison, for example, stunned the world.

Yet there are thousands of similar cases, less well publicized but well documented by researchers, in places as varied as Chile, Greece and Iran. The United Nations reported that out of 5,000 male concentration camp detainees held near Sarajevo during the Bosnian conflict, 80 percent acknowledged having been abused sexually. In El Salvador, 76 percent of male political prisoners told researchers they had experienced sexual torture.

Rape has long been a way to humiliate, traumatize and silence the enemy. For many of the same reasons that combatants assault women and girls, they also rape men and boys.

Nevertheless, international legal documents routinely reflect the assumption that sexual violence happens only to women and girls. There are dozens of references to "violence against women" — defined to include sexual violence — in United Nations human rights resolutions, treaties and agreements, but most don't mention sexual violence against men.

Ignoring male rape has a number of consequences. For one, it not only neglects men and boys, it also harms women and girls by reinforcing a viewpoint that equates "female" with "victim," thus hampering our ability to see women as strong and empowered.

In the same way, silence about male victims reinforces unhealthy expectations about men and their supposed invulnerability. Such hyper-masculine ideals encourage aggressive behavior in men that is dangerous for the women and girls with whom they share their lives.

Sex-specific stereotypes also distort the international community's response. Women who have suffered rape in conflict have likely endured non-sexual trauma as well. But when they are treated as "rape victims," their other injuries get minimized.

Conversely, when men have experienced sexual abuse and are treated solely as “torture victims,” we ignore the sexual component of their suffering. Indeed, doctors and emergency aid workers are rarely trained to recognize the physical signs of male rape or to provide counseling to its victims.

Our failure to acknowledge male rape leaves it in the shadows, compounding the humiliation that survivors experience. For instance, the majority of Tamil males in Sri Lanka who were sexually assaulted during that country’s long civil war did not report it to the authorities at the time, later explaining that they were simply too ashamed.

The United Nations has attempted to take wartime rape seriously. In 2000 the Security Council passed Resolution 1325 which, among other things, promotes gender-sensitive training in peacekeeping, encourages hiring more women in peacekeeping roles and calls for better protection of women and girls in conflict zones. This is a crucial undertaking, but the agreement neglects to address sexual violence against men and boys.

At a ceremony last year marking the resolution’s 10th anniversary, [Secretary of State Hillary Clinton](#) announced that the United States would develop a plan to accelerate the advancement of its goals, including \$44 million for women’s equality initiatives around the world.

This is an important commitment. But the American government should expand its efforts to include the many international programs working with men and boys to challenge entrenched ideas about manhood and to stop the cycle of violence.

The International Criminal Court, nearly all American states and many countries use a sex-neutral definition of sexual assault. The United Nations and the White House must likewise move beyond the shortcomings of Resolution 1325 and commit to ending wartime sexual violence against everyone.

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