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# HIDDEN CASUALTIES: SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN CONFLICT

Women and girls in conflict and post-conflict settings face increased risks of sexual violence and urgently need sexual and reproductive healthcare services, such as obstetric and antenatal care for pregnant women, access to contraceptive information and services, including emergency contraception, and access to safe abortion and post-abortion care, but often are unable to or prevented from accessing these services. Addressing sexual violence and the lack of sexual and reproductive health information and services in these settings is central not only to an effective humanitarian response but also to fulfilling fundamental human rights obligations.

The growing number of violent conflicts worldwide<sup>2</sup> has been accompanied by an increase in sexual violence targeting women and girls and an increase in internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees, the majority of whom are women and children.<sup>3</sup>

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are nearly 60 million forcibly displaced people throughout the world<sup>4</sup> and 13.9 million were newly displaced due to conflict or persecution in 2014. Conflict has dire consequences on women and girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights. The maternal mortality rate is 60% higher in conflict and post-conflict countries than the global ratio of 210 deaths per 100,000 live births.<sup>5</sup> According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA),"[s]ixty per cent of preventable maternal deaths take place among women struggling to survive conflicts, natural disasters and displacement."

Young women and girls in conflict and post-conflict settings face an increased risk of physical and sexual violence. This includes an increase in child, early and forced marriages due to a lack of economic resources and because this practice is viewed by families as a way to "protect" their daughters. According to UN Women, "the rate of child marriage among Syrian refugee girls in Jordan is now 51 per cent, compared to between 13 and 17 per cent in Syria before the war. "8 Women and girls also face increased risks of sexual violence, including rape, sexual assault, forced pregnancy and forced abortion, trafficking, forced marriage, and forced prostitution. 9

Moreover, women and girls in conflict situations, particularly survivors of sexual violence and displaced women and girls, are often in urgent need of sexual and reproductive healthcare.

Disintegrating health infrastructure in conflict settings can have critical impacts on reproductive health. According to the United Nations Secretary General's Report on Women and Peace and Security, the maternal mortality ratio in conflict and post-conflict countries is 60 percent higher than the global ratio, partly as a result of lack of access to healthcare services. <sup>10</sup> In addition, unsafe, restrictive, or repressive environments; prohibitive costs; lack of information in a language they understand; and fear of further violence or stigmatization for seeking care make it difficult for women and girls to access these services. <sup>11</sup>



## 61% OF MATERNAL DEATHS GLOBALLY OCCUR IN 35 COUNTRIES AFFECTED BY A HUMANITARIAN CRISIS OR FRAGILE CONDITIONS.

Access to services such as obstetric and antenatal care for pregnant women, access to contraceptive information and services, including emergency contraception, and access to safe abortion and post-abortion care, especially for survivors of rape

and sexual violence, are among the most pressing issues women in conflict and post-conflict situations have to face. The Global Study on the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women and Peace and Security, which highlights the role of women in conflict prevention, resolution and peacebuilding, reports that a large number of women and girls do not report sexual violence "because there are no easily accessible services or ways to report safely, receive help and be treated with dignity." 13

In addition to the lack of access to healthcare services, survivors of sexual violence and those denied access to sexual and reproductive healthcare are rarely able to seek justice and remedies for the violations they have had to endure. Disintegrating judicial systems in conflict areas, corruption, discrimination against refugee populations in host countries, fear of reprisals against their families or themselves, and the stigma associated with sexual violence all prevent women and girls from seeking justice and legal remedies for the human rights violations they have experienced.

### A HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE

In conflict and post-conflict settings, states remain bound by their international human rights obligations both in their jurisdiction and extraterritorially to persons within their effective control. <sup>14</sup> Furthermore, states receiving refugees are obligated to respect, protect, and fulfill the refugees' human rights. <sup>15</sup> States' obligations to realize women and girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights, including in conflict situations, are enshrined in numerous human rights listed below.

The Right to Equality and Non-Discrimination: Recognizing that women and girls' ability to realize their sexual and reproductive health and rights is inherently linked to their ability to access other human rights on a basis of equality, human rights treaty monitoring bodies have repeatedly recognized that states must address women and girls' distinct health needs in order to ensure equality and fulfill obligations of non-discrimination.<sup>16</sup>

**The Right to Life:** States must ensure that women can survive pregnancy and childbirth, including by ensuring their access to adequate pre- and post-natal care, emergency obstetric services, and skilled birth attendants. <sup>17</sup> Treaty monitoring bodies have further linked high rates of maternal mortality to lack of access to reproductive health services, including contraception; unsafe abortion; adolescent pregnancy; and child marriage. <sup>18</sup>

**The Right to Health:** Treaty monitoring bodies have recognized that states should guarantee all women available, accessible, acceptable, and good quality reproductive health information,

services, goods, and facilities, free from discrimination, violence and coercion. Pecognizing the breakdown in access to health services in conflict-affected areas, the Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW Committee) has explicitly called on states to ensure access to sexual and reproductive health care in conflict settings, including maternal health services, contraception, emergency contraception, safe abortion services, post-abortion care, and HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment. Pecognized Processing Percentage 19 (2014) 19 (2

The Right to be Free from Torture, Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment<sup>21</sup>: International and regional human rights mechanisms recognize that forcing women to carry to term pregnancies resulting from sexual violence can amount to ill-treatment.<sup>22</sup>

### The Right to be Free from Harmful Traditional Practices:

International and regional human rights treaties have recognized the right to be free from harmful traditional practices such as child, early, and forced marriage and female genital mutilation.<sup>23</sup> States must take all appropriate measures to eliminate customs and practices which constitute discrimination against women.<sup>24</sup>

### The Right to be Free from Sexual and Gender-Based Violence:

Under international human rights law, states must prohibit, prevent, investigate, and punish all forms of gender-based violence.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, under certain conditions, acts of sexual violence can constitute a war crime or a crime against humanity.<sup>26</sup>

**The Right to an Effective Remedy:** States must provide appropriate reparations for individuals whose rights are violated, including compensation, restitution, rehabilitation, measures of non-repetition and, where needed, measures to promote physical and psychological recovery.<sup>27</sup>

The CEDAW Committee's General Recommendation No. 30, which sets forth states' obligations to respect, protect, and fulfil women's rights and ensure gender equality in times of conflict, explicitly states that the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) remains in effect before, during, and in the aftermath of conflict. It also elaborates on states' due diligence obligation to hold non-state actors accountable for crimes perpetrated against women.<sup>28</sup>

### ENHANCING ACCOUNTABILITY

In addition, the UN Security Council has adopted several resolutions on 'Women, Peace and Security,' which together comprise the international policy framework to address the challenges women face in conflict and post-conflict situations.<sup>29</sup>

Although the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda has contributed substantially to a framework for preventing and ending impunity for international crimes related to sexual violence, it has focused heavily on the use of sexual violence, and especially rape, as weapons of war.<sup>30</sup> As a result of the focus on rape as a weapon of war, accountability for victims and survivors has been narrowly interpreted as the international criminal responsibility of perpetrators. UNSC Resolution 2242, the eighth WPS resolution acknowledges the accountability deficits to date and urges the Secretary General and other UN entities to address them.<sup>31</sup> In addition to rape and sexual violence as a weapon of war, many human rights violations stem from sexual violence and the lack of access to sexual and reproductive health services.

### A HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH IS CRITICAL

A human rights-based approach (HRBA) to addressing sexual violence and sexual and reproductive rights violations in conflict settings recognizes and addresses the root causes of such violations to better prevent and eradicate these practices. This approach would take stock of legal protection gaps and harmful policies in national contexts that need to be changed, reaffirm states' obligations under human rights laws, and clarify the positive measures states should take to ensure women's access to sexual and reproductive health services. Further, a HRBA would prioritize the meaningful participation of women in all stages of humanitarian response and interventions, from the development to the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of service policies and programs. A HRBA would also help guarantee a broader understanding of accountability by ensuring that there are functioning mechanisms to access justice and that these mechanisms are able to confer meaningful and effective remedies and reparations on a basis of non-discrimination.32



The right to an effective remedy under international human rights law includes the right to appropriate reparations, including compensation, restitution, rehabilitation, measures of non-repetition and, where needed, measures to promote physical and psychological recovery.<sup>33</sup> There should also be an appropriate gendered assessment to the harm that is suffered, meaning that reparations should address women's specific needs and the structural inequalities that enabled the violations, with a view to ensuring these violations do not continue.<sup>34</sup> The CEDAW Committee has called for reparative measures to be transformative, meaning that they address "the structural inequalities which led to the violations of women's rights, respond to women's specific needs and prevent their re-occurrence."<sup>35</sup>

General Recommendation N°30 by the CEDAW Committee states that there is a need for a concerted and integrated approach that places the implementation of the Security Council's WPS agenda into the broader framework of the Implementation of the CEDAW Convention and its Optional Protocol.<sup>36</sup> The results of the Global Study on implementation of UNSC Resolution 1325 echo this recommendation by calling for increased linkages between the WPS agenda and existing human rights mechanisms, such as CEDAW as well as the Human Rights Council and its mechanisms.<sup>37</sup>

## **CALL TO ACTION**

- Conflict and post-conflict states, host states, and donor states should prioritize the realization of women and girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights, including through the provision of maternal health care, contraception, safe abortion care, and post-abortion services.
- States, relevant agencies, and humanitarian organizations should work together to allocate adequate resources to gather data
  on sexual violence and the provision of sexual and reproductive health services to ensure that interventions reflect the actual
  situation of women and girls affected by conflict.
- Governments should take effective measures to prevent and address violations of women and girls' sexual and reproductive
  rights in conflict settings not only by holding perpetrators accountable, but also by providing holistic reproductive health
  services for all women affected by conflict, and ensuring access to justice and redress for sexual and reproductive rights
  violations and violations stemming from sexual violence.
- International human rights bodies and political bodies, including the Human Rights Council, must address sexual violence
  and violations of sexual and reproductive rights in conflict settings by including this issue in state reviews, passing relevant
  resolutions calling on states to recognize the importance of a human rights-based response, and strengthening the human
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### **Endnotes**

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