

# The impact of armed conflict on women

22 May 2012

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Thank you to the NATO Committee on Gender Perspectives for your invitation to speak to you today.

My name is Brigid Inder and I am the Executive Director of the Women's Initiatives for Gender Justice.

For those of you who don't know us, the Women's Initiatives is an international women's human rights organisation that advocates for the prosecution of gender based crimes by the International Criminal Court (ICC) and through domestic mechanisms. We work with women and communities most affected by each of the seven armed conflicts under ICC investigation. As such, we have country-based programmes working with local women's rights actors and peace advocates in Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Sudan, the Central African Republic, Kenya and Libya where we have initiated a documentation programme on gender-based violence specifically committed during the 'revolution' and civil unrest. We also have a legal monitoring and advocacy project on the Côte d'Ivoire, the most recent case opened by the ICC, as well as an advocacy project in Kyrgyzstan, a country with one of the highest rates of bride-kidnapping in the world.

The Women's Initiatives works with more than 6,000 members and partners in armed conflicts who are predominantly grassroots women's rights and peace advocates, victim/survivor groups, development and human rights organisations, transitional justice networks, members of parliament and security personnel. We also work with a large number of regional and international allies with whom we are building a global movement and constituency for gender justice, peace and security.

The focus of our organisation is directed towards the multiple phases of armed conflict and peace building and as such we have programmes on international and domestic accountability; the inclusion of women and women's organisations within victims assistance programmes and court-ordered reparations; the participation of women in peace building and formal peace negotiations; and the integration of women in post-conflict reconstruction and recovery initiatives. In this regard, we have been directly involved in three peace processes in relation to Uganda, Darfur and eastern DRC.

The Women's Initiatives was the first NGO to file before the International Criminal Court and to date we are the only international women's human rights organisation to have been granted *amicus curiae* status by the Court. We value these critical opportunities to shape international criminal law including

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the development of the practices for the prosecution of gender-based crimes as well as the jurisprudence to emerge in this field.

### **Gender-based crimes**

For the ICC or any justice or security-related organisation, such as NATO, to effectively consider and integrate gender-issues within its work, it is essential to understand that gender analysis is both a descriptive tool and an analytical tool. Meaning, gender analysis or awareness or gender competence as it is sometimes called, enables us to describe the differences between the way men and women experience similar contexts, acts or events, and the different ways in which the same or similar incidences are perceived. Applying a gender analysis also enables and requires us to understand the meaning, purpose and impact of the same or similar contexts, acts or events from a gender perspective. Therefore, a 'gender awareness' approach incorporates the recognition of the different ways in which women and men may experience conflict, post-conflict settings, security operations and interventions; and also incorporates an understanding of the discriminations embedded in gendered roles and violence, and thus addresses not only the acts themselves but the power, purpose and impact of these acts.

We often hear that rape is a weapon of war, but we don't often hear how or why. In our view - rape is such an effective weapon of war, because it relies on pre-existing norms, standards and belief-systems regarding gender inequality to create a breakdown within the community; to fracture individual and family networks; to splinter social and cultural connections and to assert dominance, commonly ethnic dominance, through the use of acts already legitimized as the means of expressing such dominance, that is – through sexualised violence, most commonly rape, predominantly against women.

The Rome Statute, the founding treaty of the ICC, recognises a wide range of gender-based violence. For the first time rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilisation, gender-based persecutions and other forms of sexual violence have been codified as war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide. The Rome Statute therefore contains the most advanced articulation in the history of international criminal and humanitarian law of acts of violence committed primarily against women.

### **ICC in context**

It is obvious that the ICC is one of the pillars of justice and justice is one of the pillars of the global system of peace and security. The ICC operates in countries with limited functional state institutions and little public sector accountability. The Court's work is compounded by the realities of ongoing conflicts, and the limited role states are able and willing to play in securing the arrest of ICC indictees residing on their territory.



According to the 2011 Corruption Perceptions Index published by Transparency International,<sup>1</sup> all countries under investigation by the ICC rank in the top 25% of the most corrupt countries in the world.<sup>2</sup>

The global system of justice has cycles of progress and retreat and is without doubt shaped and determined by the larger political and economic agendas. It is clear that the current economic crisis has impacted responses to conflict situations with now even greater competition for political attention and humanitarian resources in response to natural disasters and conflict-induced crises alongside diminished levels of domestic support for such initiatives.

### **Effects on women of armed conflict**

I would like to outline some of the impact and effects of armed conflicts on communities and in this regard I will focus my comments on the impact on women, as this is who we have experience working with since 2004 in more than six armed conflicts.

As you may know, eastern DRC has endured three decades of armed conflict. United Nations reports indicate that five million civilians have died as a result of conflict since the 1990's. It is estimated that at the height of the DRC's six-year war, more than 33,000 children were fighting with armed groups and close to 30% of the children abducted were girls. Sexual violence against women and girls has been found to be the most common form of violence and the most widespread form of criminality.

The United Nations Population Fund has reported that 16,000 new instances of sexual violence were recorded across the nation in a one year period. There were close to 5,000 new cases in Northern Kivu alone. The UN also reported that over 65% of rape victims during that time were children. The majority of this percentage was adolescent girls and roughly 10% of child victims are said to be under 10 years old.

In 2006, the Women's Initiatives carried out its first two documentation missions in eastern DRC.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of the missions was to gather information about the gender-based crimes reportedly

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<sup>1</sup> Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index 2011, December 2011, accessed at <http://www.transparency.org/cpi2011/results>; retrieved 29 March 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic, Libya, Sudan, Kenya and Côte d'Ivoire.

<sup>3</sup> The organisational methodology for the field missions included hiring three local activists as consultants to locate victims/survivors and implement the interview questions designed by the organisation specifically for these missions. The consultants received online interview support before the first mission and in-person interview and documentation training from the Women's Initiatives prior to the second mission. The interview data was translated, fact checked and analysed for inclusion in the dossier submitted to the Office of the Prosecutor in August 2006. Documentation equipment was also provided in the form of laptops and a camera. Given the high levels of insecurity in eastern DRC, the local activists preferred to operate as 'consultants' rather than to have a formal partnership between their organisations and the Women's Initiatives thus limiting the number of people who knew about the missions. In addition, a security protocol was developed including an evacuation policy, provision of a satellite phone, funds for immediate escape should any member of the team be threatened and



committed by a range of militias but with a particular focus on one group – the *Union des patriotes Congolais* (UPC), given the arrest of Thomas Lubanga Dyilo, President of the UPC, by the ICC. The ICC indictment of Mr Lubanga did not include any charges for gender-based crimes, despite several reports alleging the UPC's responsibility for the commission of these crimes in Ituri.

Of the 55 victims/survivors interviewed in our 2006 missions, 51 were victims/survivors of gender-based crimes, including 48 women and three men who had been forced to rape women. Our documentation indicated that more than 40% of those who reported sexual violence had been gang raped, with several interviewees reporting that they had been gang-raped on more than one occasion either by the same perpetrators or by members of the same militia group.

More than half of those who experienced gang rape specified the number of offenders involved in the incident, indicating a range of 2-10 perpetrators. Analysis of the interviews indicated that more than 90% of the victims/survivors of gender-based crimes had experienced multiple attacks, meaning they had been subjected to more than one sexual or non-sexual attack including gang rape, beatings, abduction, torture and forced labour.

## **Injuries**

The injuries reported were extensive. Interviewees expressed a range of mental and psychological injuries including the inability to work, mental anguish, memory lapses, anxiety, inability to look people in the eye, and constant fear. Physical impairments included genital wounds, vesico-vaginal fistula, mutilation of limbs, and pain in the hips, chest and abdomen, vaginal pain, inability to walk, vaginal discharge, inability to urinate or defecate, sexually transmitted diseases, recurrent headaches, loss of teeth, and hypotension. Despite these injuries, only 27% of interviewees reported receiving medical assistance despite the severity of the medical, physiological and material needs following their brutalisation.

Last September, we initiated a documentation programme in Libya interviewing women victims/survivors of rape and other forms of sexual violence. The documentation programme also collected information about the consequences of these crimes. Preliminary analysis of this data suggests that 40% of the women interviewed have been divorced by their husbands as a consequence of telling them they had been raped; 25% had not told their families for fear of rejection; 50% had not sought nor had access to medical treatment and assistance; and 90% reported having limited financial means to support themselves and their children.

The low rates of access to medical care in both the DRC and Libya is largely due to the unavailability of medical facilities and services to provide the necessary surgeries, medical treatment and psychosocial assistance. In response to this, in 2011 we initiated a Transit House project with one of our local

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daily check-ins during the missions. Funds and logistical support were also made available for interviewees who required urgent medical and psychosocial assistance.

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partners, in a rural and remote area of South Kivu. The project has four psychosocial assistants who identify women in need of surgeries as a result of rape and other forms of sexual violence. The assistants support those injured to travel to the one hospital in the province capable of performing these surgeries. On route they stay at the Transit House to rest before continuing their long journey. They also return to the Transit House post-surgery to recover before returning home.

In the first four months of this project, 214 individuals, of whom 13 men and 201 women, received a medical assessment and psychological assistance, including counselling; 142 individuals temporarily stayed at the Transit House before being referred to Panzi Hospital for surgery or to the local health centres for non-surgical medical treatment; and 92 survivors received home-care following medical and psychological treatment.

In addition, other activities have begun to emerge centred around the Transit House, including the distribution of 1,200 female and male condoms, voluntary HIV/AIDS screening, community counselling through the production of narrative theatre, and individual counselling.

Access to services, information and programmes, to shaping policies and to participating in public life is highly diminished for women during and following armed conflict. In particular, the patterns of gender-exclusion prevalent prior to the conflict are most often replicated in the post-conflict society, and we have found clear indications of women continuing to be marginalised during the reconstruction and recovery process.

### **Uganda: Reconstruction**

In 2010 we conducted a survey with almost 500 individuals, predominantly women in northern Uganda, from 13 sub districts and all of the regions most affected by the activities of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). The purpose of the survey was to assess the level of knowledge amongst women most affected by the armed conflict in relation to the Ugandan Peace, Recovery and Development Plan (PRDP); to ascertain whether women had benefited from the PRDP and the reconstruction initiatives; and to learn about what women in northern Uganda identified as their most pressing needs and priorities in the post-conflict reconstruction period.

The results of the survey indicated that there were three groups of women who had been marginalised in the Peace, Recovery and Development Plan. These were: widows; young women abducted by the LRA; and young women abducted by the LRA who returned with children as a result of rape and sexual enslavement.

In addition, these groups identified their urgent needs as:

- Food security – many interviewees reported that they were often hungry and unable to feed their families. This was especially true for widows who were bearing additional family responsibilities for grandchildren whose parents had died or been killed or abducted by the LRA.

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In this regard any activities which support the development of crops, agriculture and food production are highly desirable in northern Uganda.

- Access to housing and land – many interviewees reported that they had been displaced during the conflict and had no homes to return to. Some reported that as they had lost their husbands during the conflict, male family members were not allowing them to inherit the house or the land where they had once lived.
- Economic opportunities including income generation programmes.
- The desire to send their children, including their girls, back to school so they can complete their education.
- Access to medical services for physical and psychosocial support.

One of our specific objectives with our local partners in Northern Uganda is to open the first rape crisis centre in the north of the country.

### **Reciprocity**

I would like to provide two final concepts for further food for thought over the course of your meeting. The first is reciprocity. And by that I mean that in addition to integrating gender considerations as a means of increasing understanding of and support for NATO objectives in theatres of operation, that NATO also considers integrating into its security objectives the explicit intention to advance gender issues and gender equality as a part of its peace and security mandate.

It is clear that security actors have much to gain from forging contacts and relationships with women in post-conflict environments and fragile states. It provides additional information and intelligence and builds trust and confidence not only with individuals but with their families. Such relationships may also provide an entree into community knowledge regarding the original conflict, specific militias, political groups, the cultural context of the conflict, and incidents relevant to security operations.

However, it may be of interest to consider ways in which adopting a reciprocity strategy could enhance not only NATO's security goals but also support broader and gender-specific human security and human rights objectives.

### **Transformative Security**

The second concept is one of transformative security – operations which assist, enable and create the conditions which transform both communal and gender relations in a country emerging from conflict, especially as the country begins the process of resetting its legal, cultural, social and economic norms and demographics. Such a strategy may contribute to the collective promotion of women's rights, prevent the future commission of ongoing acts of gender-based violence and promote the non-



repetition of human rights violations. It may also support recognition of the full set of women's human rights, replacing the diminished and partial rights bearing status they were assigned prior to and during the conflict.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to participate in your discussions today and congratulations to the Gender Perspectives Committee for all you have achieved.

