

Ending Violence Against Women and Girls in Conflict Contexts

Canadian Efforts and Experiences

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Cet article considère les rôles que le Canada et les Canadiens ont à jouer pour en finir avec la violence faite aux femmes et aux filles dans un contexte de guerre. Il est question de la relation du Canada face à la résolution 1325 inscrite dans le conseil de sécurité des Nations Unies et certaines activités du gouvernement et de la société civile.

Recent years have seen violent conflicts shattering the lives of people around the world, causing death and injury, displacement from their homes, disruption of economic and other activities, and creating fear and insecurity on a large scale. Unlike the wars of previous centuries, conflict is now fought in communities, in the streets, homes, and workplaces of ordinary civilians. Increasingly it is acknowledged that in these contexts, women, girls, boys, and men experience conflict differently. Although more men and boys are killed in conflict, the impacts for women and girls are also brutal, as ethnic hatred, oppression and intolerance are being played out on their bodies. Sexual violence has become part and parcel of the havoc wreaked by fighting forces on women and girls within their own ranks, as well as on women and girls of the “other” side. During the genocide in Rwanda, for example, tens of thousands of women were raped, many of whom were also infected with HIV/AIDS; very few of

these women have had any legal redress (Human Rights Watch 2004).

Although such conflicts take place far from Canada and in apparently very different contexts, Canada nonetheless has an important role to play in ending violence against girls and women in conflict contexts. Canadian government and civil society are actively engaged in various initiatives and on an international level, Canada is seen as a leader in the field. While this is an important issue for foreign policy, it is also an issue with domestic resonance and significance because of the refugee and immigrant women in Canada who have lived through such experiences. This article considers the role that Canada and Canadians play in reducing the devastating impacts of conflict on women and girls; it describes Canada’s relationship with the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on women, peace and security (and some of the ongoing activities of both government and civil society). The article ends by describing some of the gaps which still exist and some possible ways of addressing these in the future.

The Extent of Violence Against Women and Girls in Conflict Contexts

Gender-based violence¹ exists in all countries and contexts and is always

a violation of human rights and therefore unacceptable. In recent years numerous reports have highlighted the use of rape as a weapon of war, the sexual exploitation of girls and young women by peacekeeping forces and humanitarian aid workers, and the inability of the international community to prevent this abuse and to protect women and girls from sexual and gender-based violence in conflict and post conflict settings.

Despite calls from the United Nations Security Council through UNSCR 1325 to encourage all parties to armed conflict to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, increased attention to codes of conduct as outlined in the Secretary General’s Bulletin on Special Measures for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse,² for field workers of many international and domestic non-governmental organizations, these issues remain peripheral to human security and peace-building policy and programming efforts.

It is often the situation of conflict and war that creates conditions of violence that lead to rape and sexual abuse. As was the case in Rwanda, where women’s bodies became a site of ethnic clashes, sexual violence—especially rape—is the most immediate and dangerous type of gender-based violence occurring in acute emergencies. Yet it is well docu-

mented that gender-based violence continues after such acute situations have lessened, as many women and girls face a high risk of gender based violence during early reconstruction and transition periods. Rape and sexual attacks continue and other forms of gender-based violence occur, including harmful traditional practices, such as female genital mu-

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tilation, forced early marriage and honour killings, and domestic violence (IASC 2005). The following statistics give some idea of the extent of the risks for women and girls in conflict contexts:

- Between 50,000 and 64,000 internally displaced women in Sierra Leone reported experiencing sexual violence at the hands of armed combatants. Half of internally displaced women who had face-to-face contact with combatants reported experiencing sexual violence.
- It is estimated that between 20,000 and 50,000 women were raped during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the early 1990s. (IASC)
- Sexual violence has been used as a weapon of war by most of the forces involved in the conflict in eastern Congo. Some rapists aggravated their crimes by other acts of extraordinary

brutality, shooting victims in the vagina or mutilating them with knives or razor blades. Some killed their victims outright while others left them to die of their injuries. Girls as young as five years of age or elderly women as old as eighty were attacked (Human Rights Watch 2002).

UN Security Council Resolution 1325

The United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1325 on the topic of women, peace and security, on October 31, 2000. It was, and remains highly significant in that it was the first UN Security Council resolution to specifically acknowledge the impacts of conflict—particularly sexual violence—for women and girls. The resolution was the result of extensive lobbying from member states, including Bangladesh, Jamaica, Namibia, and Canada. There was also considerable pressure from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), especially women's NGOs and other UN agencies including the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). UNSCR 1325 is certainly not a magic formula for stopping violence against women in conflict contexts, nor does it stand alone; it has to be understood in relation to other international documents and plans of action that address gender equality and the protection of the rights of girls and women, such as the Beijing Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). UNSCR 1325 does however, provide a useful framework from which to develop and improve policy and programming, at least at the macro level.

UNSCR 1325 is an 18-point document that focuses on four inter-related areas of action: (1) participation of women at all decision-making levels and in peace processes; (2) the inclusion of gender training in peacekeeping operations;

(3) protection of the rights of girls and women; and, (4) gender mainstreaming in the reporting and implementation systems of the United Nations. Within each of these four areas, UNSCR 1325 encourages action to be taken by the United Nations in general, the Security Council, the Secretary General, member states such as Canada, and all parties to armed conflict. It is significant in that a Security Council Resolution brings international attention to a particular issue and also provides a political framework that recommends action to be taken by governments and international institutions. In the case of UNSCR 1325, a gender perspective is demanded on a range of activities including peace negotiations, peace operations training, design of internally displaced persons' (IDP) camps, and reconstruction programming. In addition, the resolution provides a platform from which members of civil society can demand accountability from their governments. UNSCR 1325 has built momentum in Canada and around the world for increased action on addressing gender inequalities and the protection of the rights of girls and women in conflict and post-conflict situations. This momentum has taken the form of research, conferences, task forces, publications, and NGO-government dialogue; it has contributed to the strengthening of national and international advocacy networks and strategies (Hub).

In this article we focus on Section 3 in which it is recognized that armed conflict heightens the risk of human rights violations and increases personal insecurity for civilian populations. UNSCR 1325 acknowledges the gender dimensions and differences in the protection of human rights in conflict and post-conflict situations and calls on "all parties to armed conflict to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence." These measures include ensuring respect for international law with regards to wom-

en's human rights, protecting women and girls from sexual abuse and gender-based violence, including rape, and ending impunity for perpetrators of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes including sexual and gender-based violence crimes. UNSCR 1325 also draws attention to the importance of recognizing the different protection needs of women and girls in the different stages, from pre-conflict through to post-conflict situations; for example, the protection of girls and women in IDP camps and the protection of witnesses at international courts and tribunals.

Canadian Efforts on the Implementation of UNSCR 1325

Government Initiatives

It is impossible to identify specific impacts of the resolution, and especially if and how it has actually impacted the lives of women and girls affected by conflict. As discussed later, one of the major issues related to UNSCR 1325 is that there was no monitoring mechanism established or indicators identified when it was passed. Having said this, Canada has taken a leadership role at least in raising awareness of the resolution, and in integrating it into its own foreign policy initiatives, and into its work within multi-lateral fora. One such example is the New York-based *Friends of Women, Peace and Security* group, a coalition of representatives from like-minded states, UN agencies and NGOs, initiated and chaired by Canada, which meets to build political support for UNSCR 1325 and to discuss priorities for implementation.

In terms of concrete actions to improve the protection of the rights of girls and women and to promote mechanisms that work toward the protection of these rights, such as ending impunity, prosecuting perpetrators of gender-based violence, sexual exploitation and other war crimes, and crimes against humanity, the Canadian government has

also made efforts. It supports international justice mechanisms to generate increased awareness and attention to gender-based crimes; for example, Canada provided some funding to the International Criminal Court to ensure that there was a gender component to the training of their judges. In a joint project with the UK, gender-training materials which address gender-based violence and sexual exploitation have been developed to prepare military personnel and civilian police deployed to peace operation missions. However, the extent to which these materials are actually used is hard to ascertain. Canada established the Interdepartmental Working Group on Gender and Peacebuilding, to bring together different federal departments involved in the implementation of UNSCR 1325, including Foreign Affairs Canada (FAC), the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), Citizenship and Immigration Canada, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). Under the leadership of Foreign Affairs Canada, the Canadian government has started planning for the development of a National Action Plan for the implementation of UNSCR 1325. While still in a preliminary stage, the National Action Plan, as demonstrated by like-minded countries such as Norway and Denmark, could serve as an effective policy tool that may strengthen coherence among Canada's diplomatic, defense and development efforts on gender equality and the protection of the rights of girls and women.

NGO and Civil Society Initiatives

Canadian NGOs and civil society groups are highly active on the women, peace and security agenda, and are involved in advocacy, research and programming initiatives to ensure that women's rights are respected, that sexual violence is prevented but also that perpetrators of

such crimes are pursued and prosecuted. For example, the Gender and Peacebuilding Working Group (GPWG) of the Canadian Peacebuilding Coordinating Committee (CPCC)³ exists to strengthen collaboration among Canadian organizations, activists, and academics by providing a forum for the exchange of resources, facilitating dialogue between and among civil society and government, and contributing to the direction of programming and policy. The GPWG aims to achieve progress in translating the general international commitments that have been made on gender equality and peacebuilding into concrete actions in specific situations and to promote the active participation and recognition of the contribution women have made to human security and peacebuilding. One of the constant agenda issues of the GPWG is violence against women in conflict contexts, and a workshop was organized in March 2005 on the topic for representatives from government, NGO representatives and academia. Major recommendations emerging from that workshop include:

UNSCR 1325 draws attention to the importance of recognizing the different protection needs of women and girls in the different stages, from pre-conflict through to post-conflict situations; i.e., the protection of girls and women in IDP camps.

- Canada must fully operationalize its international and region-specific commitments regarding the elimination of violence against women and gender-based violence in conflict-affected zones.
- All Canadian organizations re-

ceiving emergency assistance should be required to have codes of conduct (for employees and partners) consistent with the UN Secretary General's Special Measures for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse.

- Gender training for members of the Canadian Armed Forces and civilian police deployed to conflict situations should include substantive information on gender-based violence, sexual abuse and exploitation.

- Canadian foreign policy promotion of the Responsibility to Protect framework⁴ should have a stronger gender focus especially relating to sexual abuse and gender-based violence in conflict and post-conflict settings.

Gaps and Challenges to Address

As indicated above, the difficulties of measuring the impacts of the international policy instruments such as UNSCR 1325 on the lives of women and girls living in conflict contexts present a major challenge. UNSCR 1325 is a far-reaching framework that needs to be translated into concrete actions by governments and international institutions. Most governments have made “broad commitments and several ad hoc initiatives but [governments] lack monitoring and reporting mechanisms to advance the implementation of SCR 1325” (NGO Working Group on Women Peace and Security, 2004). The resolution can certainly act as an advocacy tool for women and women's groups to which they can hold governments accountable, but even before that, it requires considerable unpacking and may not be very accessible to grassroots organizations.

Even at the governmental level, despite the coordination mechanisms that do exist, there are gaps in programming and policy across the different departments. One example is

the fact that CIDA does not yet require all contractors and implementing agencies operating in conflict contexts to sign and adhere to clear codes of conduct that explicitly address sexual abuse and exploitation. The Canadian Civil Society response to the Official Government of Canada Report on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women,

Recommendations for protecting girls from sexual violence include ensuring educational opportunities, as well as increasing girls' participation in decision-making regarding their own safety and their own priorities for peace.

Peace and Security, coordinated by the GPWG highlights the limited impact of a series of seemingly disconnected activities (such as roundtables, reports) and questions the extent to which various recommendations relating to the impacts of conflict on women and girls have actually translated into concrete policy and program actions.

There are other limitations and gaps in efforts, but one to highlight particularly is the limited attention to the differentiated effects of armed conflict on women and on girls of different ages and stages of development. There is a noticeable tendency—in policy documents especially—to talk about women and girls as if there was no differentiation in experience, perspectives, vulnerabilities and protection needs. This is particularly noticeable within the text of UNSCR 1325 which in no way fully reflects the complexities and differences in gender identities that are critical in conflict and post-conflict situations, for example, age, eth-

nicity and class. These differences relate to experiences, coping strategies and needs, all of which are crucial to developing appropriate programming responses in conflict and post-conflict contexts. Recent studies and reports help to articulate some of the specific issues relating to the vulnerabilities of adolescent girls, and the gender-age dimensions of power imbalances in conflict contexts.⁵ Girls may be particularly targeted for sexual abuse by fighting forces, and at the same time, in refugee camps and other such settings may be subject to sexual exploitation by the very people there to care for them, including peace-keepers, humanitarian workers and even teachers (UNHCR/Save the Children). There is also increased awareness of the particular experiences of girls and young women in fighting forces and their multiple roles within such groups. Recommendations for protecting girls and young women from sexual violence include ensuring appropriate and empowering educational opportunities, as well as increasing opportunities for girls' participation in decision-making regarding their own safety as well as their own priorities for peace (GPWG/WCRWC).

Concluding Thoughts

Whilst at risk from sexual and gender-based violence in conflict contexts girls and women—young and old—are not only victims. They have multiple identities, and through their roles as mothers, heads of households, as combatants and also as peace activists they often demonstrate incredible resiliency, coping and survival skills. It is imperative that all efforts to protect women and girls from sexual violence recognize this and do not cast them only in the role of helpless victims. Maintaining such identities—and the agency inherent within them—is critical to ensuring that policy and programs to support women and girls affected by conflict do meet their multiple needs and do

empower and support them to act to assert their rights within their families, organizations and communities.

There are clearly some very positive initiatives to recognize from Canadian government and civil society with regard to ending violence against women in conflict contexts, but there is still a lot to be done. Rape and other forms of sexual violence continue unimpeded on a daily basis. Policy makers, practitioners, and researchers need to pay more attention to the root causes of these types of violence and their connection to wider structures of violence, conflict and power relations. Although women and girls are victims of sexual violence there is a risk that programs exclusively addressing this type of violence will be developed but not linked to larger policy prescriptions for conflict prevention, conflict resolution and reconstruction. Sexual abuse and gender-based violence should be included in broader analysis of peace, conflict, security and development. It is an egregious violation of the rights of women and girls, and is also a major barrier to their effective participation in development within their families, communities and societies. It can prevent participation in education, in economic activities as well as in peace-building activities and processes. Some of the strategies now being adopted by civil society to move beyond policy statements on the protection of women and girls include advocacy to mainstream action against violence against women, and linking violence against women domestically to the international contexts in which violence against women is endemic. Amnesty International, for example, has taken up this approach in its recent campaign.⁶ Other strategies include focusing on specific geographical areas to assess the specific women peace and security issues and the extent to which measures outlined in UNSCR 1325 are being implemented. For example, in 2004 the McGill Centre for Research and Teaching on Women held a workshop specifically

on women's experiences of the conflict between India and Pakistan and their role in peacebuilding.⁷ The Gender and Peace-building Working Group undertook a study in the Great Lakes region with the aim of making targeted, regionally specific recommendations. Canadian civil society cannot work alone, and linkages are need to international activities, strategies and approaches. The GPWG, for example, has recently collaborated with the New York-based Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children to prepare a fact sheet on a topic of shared concern—adolescent girls affected by violent conflict.⁸

A final strategy to highlight for further development is that of engaging with Canadian girls and young women in order to raise their awareness of the abuses of women's and girls' rights in conflict contexts, and to engage them in appropriate advocacy, research and action initiatives. One such example was a workshop held at McGill University in 2003, "Young Women and Global Activism: Girls and Young Women Address Conflict, Peace and Security." This workshop was an indication of the energy and interest of Canadian young women, especially students and activists, as well as a call for government and NGOs to reach out to them with relevant and accessible information, programs and materials.

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¹The term "gender-based violence" (GBV) is used to refer to all forms of violence that are related to gender roles and gendered power imbalances in society. Although men and women, boys and girls can be subjected to gender-based violence, it is most often perpetrated by men against women and girls. Gender-based violence includes, but is not limited to, sexual violence such as rape; it also includes domestic violence and harmful traditional practices.

²See: <http://ochaonline.un.org/GetBin.asp?DocID=1083>

³See: <http://www.peacebuild.ca/working/?load=gender>

⁴See: http://www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/foreign_policy/responsibility_protect-en.asp

⁵See for example GPWG and WCRWC 2005; McKay and Mazurana.

⁶See: <http://www.amnestyusa.org/stopviolence/index.do>

⁷See: <http://www.mcgill.ca/mcrtw/peace/>

⁸See: <http://www.peacebuild.ca/working/?load=gender>

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ALISON PRYER

little red suitcase (for Mum)

faded to deep peony from the original rose,
but ever small and elegant
as would become any young lady
who traveled in the cool days of Frank and Ella,
wearing white gloves like Grace and
a knotted silk square like Audrey.

once a vessel of my mother's dreams,
now even the sun-dusted snaps of holidays
in Italy and Spain are gone.
my mother too.
the case is packed, but it's not going anywhere —
all done with running, a keeper of memories.

inside, slender ribbons embrace
a nest of white treasure: handmade lace and drawn
threadwork
pillowcases scented with lavender water for sleeping
beauties;
Grandma's round Christmas tablecloth,
reindeer cross-stitched in cranberry wool,
forever running in circles;

the great-great-aunts' full-length evening gloves,
calfskin all shrunken like Mum's girlhood hopes
of learning French and going to the opera;
my sister's flyaway fairy costume, gauze wings hanging
limp,
long bereft of the twirling toddler
who granted three wishes with mere wave of dimpled hand.

this little suitcase has seen its share of rainy days,
watermarked satin interior graced with sepia stains
like the aging face of a pale carnation.
diesel fumes and raindrops clung to its skin
the morning my mother and sister fled
on a train with doors that opened outward

all the way south and into another country.
Mum wrapped her dead dreams in petals,
abandoning the sand-washed cottage and —
temple of her heart — her June garden.
silent refugee of my father's rages, she lived for a time
like a hermit crab out of this tearstained shell.

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