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THE IMPACT OF ARMED CONFLICT ON WOMEN

Women bear disproportionately the consequences of wars and suffer violations of human rights in situations of armed conflict, including terrorism, torture, disappearance, rape, ethnic cleansing, family separation and displacement. Moreover, they endure lifelong social and psychological traumas. Along with children, women constitute 80 per cent of the world's refugees and displaced persons.¹

The popular perception is that men are soldiers or aggressors, and that women are wives, mothers, nurses and social workers. While it is primarily men who are conscripted and killed in battle, women make up the majority of civilian casualties and suffer in their role as caregivers owing to a breakdown in social structures. The concept of men going to war and of women staying safely at home with children and the elderly does not reflect the reality of war. In fact, in conflict zones, women are abducted from their villages, displaced and killed along with their children in their own homes.²

In addition to representing most of the civilian casualties, women are often the sole providers for their families during armed conflicts. This leads to an increasing number of female heads of households that can be attributed to demographic changes caused by conflicts, which in turn further impoverishes women. Moreover, food scarcity and inequalities in food distribution are exacerbated during periods of armed conflicts, thereby rendering women and girls more susceptible to malnutrition.³

Additionally, the forced displacements of populations are often used for strategic purposes in conflicts in order to destabilize the social structure of warring factions. These displacements impact women disproportionately given that they reduce access to resources aimed at coping with household responsibilities, and increase physical and emotional violence.⁴ During conflicts, such everyday activities as fetching water, for example, can expose women to physical assault, sexual violence and rape. Alarming, sexual violence against women during conflicts has reached epidemic proportions. This owes partly to a perceived symbolic link by the perpetrators of such physical assaults of a woman with the honour of a party, ethnicity or country to which she belongs.

Peace and security are essential for economic growth, development and the empowerment of women; and women need to play an equal part in securing and maintaining peace. To that end, they must be empowered politically and economically, and be represented adequately at all levels of decision-making. This has been reaffirmed by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and Security Council resolution 1325 (2000), which requests Member States to increase the political representation of women; include them in decision-making, peace negotiations and conflict-resolution mechanisms; and protect them in armed conflict given that women represent one of the most vulnerable segments of society during wars and conflicts.

¹ See Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 1995.

² Amani El Jack, *Gender and Armed Conflict*, Bridge, 2003.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

Armed conflicts violate the following rights⁵

- The human right to life;
- The human right to freedom from violence, torture and cruel, inhuman treatment or punishment;
- The human right to freedom from arbitrary executions, detention and disappearance;
- The human right to freedom from genocide, ethnic cleansing and rape as a strategy of war;
- The human right to freedom from religious intolerance;
- The human right to freedom from foreign occupation or domination;
- The human right to self-determination of peoples;
- The human right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health;
- The human right to protection and assistance to displaced and refugee women;
- The human right to live by the rule of law;
- The human right to an adequate standard of living, including adequate food, medical care and necessary social services;
- The human right to sustainable development;
- The human right of the child to an environment appropriate for his or her physical, mental, spiritual and moral well-being and development;
- The human right of all people to full and equal participation in decision-making and efforts aimed at the prevention and resolution of conflicts.

⁵ For more information, see www.pdhre.org.

During the past decade, armed conflicts have taken place in the following Arab countries and territories: Algeria, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Palestine, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen.

Recommendations:⁶

- Recognize that the impact of armed conflicts, including forced displacement, impoverishment and gender-based violence, are violations of human rights rather than merely private or cultural concerns that are unavoidable outcomes of wars;
- Implement and enforce Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) in order to increase the political representation of women, and include them in decision- making, peace negotiations and conflict resolution mechanisms;
- Provide gender training and raise awareness among policymakers on the importance of including women in conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction efforts;
- Involve local women organizations in decision-making while conducting relief or conflict-related interventions;
- Provide specialized services for women who suffer from violent impacts of armed conflict, including counselling and outreach programmes to manage reproductive health concerns related to physical assault, as well as psychological traumas resulting from armed conflict.

⁶ See Amani El Jack, *op. cit.*



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