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Negotiating Culture: Gender and Reproductive Health in Conflict Situations

Since the end of the Cold War, most armed conflicts have been within rather than between States. Between 1998 and 2007, there were 34 major armed conflicts – all but three internal – and about four times that many armed conflicts in total.¹ Far more civilians than soldiers become casualties in these conflicts,² many of them women and girls.

Armed conflict threatens women’s rights – including reproductive rights – and health, and can exacerbate culturally rooted gender inequalities. Women also occupy different roles in wartime, some as combatants, and many fill the spaces in economic and political life left by men. Culturally sensitive approaches can help development practitioners mitigate some of the ill effects of conflict, minimize deterioration in gender relations and work with local communities and relevant stakeholders to protect whatever progress has been made towards gender equality, including women’s rights and reproductive health. These approaches can also help to ensure that women become important players in negotiation processes, and are integrated in post-conflict rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts.

Cultures, Gender Relations and Armed Conflicts

Much of the work on relationships between cultures and gender in conflict situations challenges conventional perceptions of men’s and women’s roles. Many cultures regard women as “mothers” and “guardians of the culture”, traditionally passive and in need of male protection. Men and boys, seen as inherently aggressive, are usually enlisted for wars, although in some societies women are involved as combatants as well as in civilian roles. Men are normally the primary targets in war and are usually most of the casualties, but sexual violence is also a tactic of warfare. Women are seen as the protectors of children – the future – and bearers of the cultural heritage – the past – of a nation or community. This makes

There is increasing awareness in the development field that longstanding cultural norms regarding the identity and role of women in society are a significant barrier to the full enjoyment of women’s rights. The social restrictions that result from these norms are often exacerbated during armed conflict.³

◀ Women’s exposure to all kinds of violence increases in wartime, including violence from their partners.

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them targets for attack. “The rape of women in conflict situations is intended not only as violence against women, but as an act of aggression against a nation or community.”⁴

Their communities may offer some sympathy to women who suffer violence, but may also regard them as tainted and worthless. The men in their families, feeling the shame of failing to “protect their women”, may subject them to further violence. Because many cultures see gender-based violence as a private issue and may even see it as normal, they do not recognize or confront it.

As a result, women rarely discuss sexual violence against them, even though it may have occurred in public view. For example, women in Kosovo, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina refused to report the sexual abuse they experienced during the war for fear of stigmatization by their communities.⁵

Men are also victims of rape. Male rape can be even more deeply shaming than female rape; therefore, “undermining men’s sense of masculinity becomes a key channel for men to exercise power over other men”.⁶ Men will rarely admit to suffering rape.

Militarization can impact on cultures by sharpening perceptions and misperceptions of existing gender roles. Militarization calls for a show of aggressive masculinity, which may involve misogyny:

The language of armies often reflects this construction of masculinity, as the most common insults are those that suggest that a soldier is homosexual or feminine. The misogyny of armies is intertwined with both homophobia and racism. Both women and members of ethnic minorities who enter the military are frequently subjected to sexual and racial harassment.⁷

Sexual violence was a by-product of the collapse of social order in Kenya brought on by the post-election conflict; but it was also a tool to terrorize individuals and families, and precipitate their flight. Anecdotal reports from all regions, in particular Mombasa, Nairobi, and parts of the North Rift, told of threats of sexual violence as a tactic to instil fear: women were told to vacate their property or they and their children would be raped. Women were further threatened in the temporary shelters to which they fled; women in houses in Timboroa, for example, were told to move or risk rape.⁸

Armed conflict imposes other costs on gender relations. Forced displacement disrupts families. Women’s burdens grow heavier because they become responsible for households, with less access to resources. As women assume leadership for families, gender roles change. This could prompt cultural changes, but men may instead respond with violence against women.⁹ In these fragile and resource-poor conditions, women and girls may try to earn money or merely a little food from sex work, including with men from occupying forces. Families may resent

these practices, and men may respond with violence, often leading to family upheavals. HIV and AIDS are spreading in conflict zones as sexual practices change. The disease brings additional stigma and is not openly discussed.

Addressing Gender Relations in Armed Conflicts: United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000)

United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution 1325, adopted in October 2000,¹⁰ was the product of intense advocacy from a number of women’s and peace organizations. Despite recognition by the Fourth World Conference on Women, there was resistance to the proposition that women’s human rights were an international security concern. UNSC resolution 1325, together with the Windhoek Declaration, 2000¹¹ establish that gender issues are pertinent to international peace and security. UNSC resolution 1325 is clear in its denunciation of human rights abuses. It takes a firm position on the importance of women’s inclusion and participation in peace negotiations and peacebuilding, despite existing cultural practices. Resolution 1325 also recognizes that its provisions can only be realized through cultural engagement, which requires “...measures that support

local women's peace initiatives and indigenous processes for conflict resolution, and that involve women in all of the implementation mechanisms of the peace agreements".

There are a number of concerns about progress on UNSC resolution 1325. First, while the resolution is a landmark, there are questions about the extent to which it incorporates men's and women's issues, as opposed to focusing largely on women and girls, and offers guidance on a gendered approach.¹² Second, progress reviews indicate that implementation requires confronting cultural obstacles within development organizations and building technical expertise among staff.¹³ It also requires agreement, at the highest levels, "that the issue of women, peace and security is consistent with the fundamental purpose of security institutions".¹⁴ Third, without culturally sensitive gendered approaches, "peace interventions" may fail to recognize and support the cultural shifts that could culminate in more equitable gender relations. They may inadvertently prop up the very structures and relations that the resolution aims to challenge. Analysts observe:

1. Gender power imbalances are entrenched within public and private institutions, including governmental and non-governmental development organizations that intervene to end armed conflict and build peace.¹⁵

25 RAPE AS A WEAPON OF WAR

"[Women who were] raped during the war tell their close friends. You hardly hear of women coming out in public to talk about all those things that happened to them. They would rather suffer in silence until they can get over it. They try to live with it or live with the idea that it didn't happen to them alone. If hundreds of other girls can live with it, you can also live with it and, gradually, it vanishes away ... but most of the raping was done in the open. A particular rebel may like your daughter, and right in front of you - the mum, the dad, the other sisters and brothers - it will be done openly. So that was how many girls got to know that their friends were raped."

Source: Bennett, O., Bexley, J. and Warnock, K. 1996. *Arms to Fight, Arms to Protect: Women Speak Out About Conflict*, p. 39. London: Panos Publications.

26 WOMEN ATTACKED: SURVIVORS CARRY EXTRA BURDENS

DARFUR, Sudan — Since the conflict began in the Darfur region of western Sudan in 2003, over 200,000 people have been killed and more than two million have been displaced. Altogether, some four million people are in need of humanitarian aid and protection. Violence against civilians, much of it against women, has been a feature of the conflict. Thousands of women have been raped. Villages have been burned to the ground and destroyed, forcing their inhabitants to flee, often with just the clothes on their backs. With their villages destroyed, many families have lived for years on the run, in informal settlements or in internal refugee camps throughout Darfur. Many women have become primary caretakers for other survivors, their responsibilities compounded by the loss of husbands and livelihoods and the need to find essentials for family survival.

Source: UNFPA. 2007. "Dispatches from Darfur: Caring for the Ones who Care for Others." New York: UNFPA. <http://www.unfpa.org/news/news.cfm?ID=1026>, accessed April 2008.

2. Humanitarian interventions make impartial assessments of victims' needs and interests, but risk being gender-blind in their delivery. The interventions of humanitarian groups often demonstrate a lack of sensitivity to gender.¹⁶
3. Although long-term interventions aimed at the social and economic integration of women can greatly improve gender relations, long-term development assistance has decreased while funding for complex humanitarian emergencies has increased proportionately.... There is even less money now for long-term development assistance, and where it is available gender equality becomes a considerably lower priority.¹⁷
4. Humanitarian aid agencies and States often shy away from challenging gender-based violence.¹⁸
5. Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes need to develop more culturally sensitive gendered approaches.
6. Generally, women are assumed to be lacking in the expertise to function in the public arena and are excluded from peace-making processes. This underrepresentation also extends to peacekeeping and peacebuilding institutions.

27 CONTESTING CULTURES WITHIN FAITH COMMUNITIES

Excerpt from *Displaced and Desperate: Assessment of Reproductive Health for Colombia's Internally Displaced Persons*. London: Marie Stopes International, February 2003.

"Two million Colombians have fled armed conflict and persecution: many of them have been uprooted and displaced repeatedly over the past 15 years. As the war continues to escalate, some people are displaced en masse, but the majority flee as individuals and families, and do not want to acknowledge their displaced status for fear of retribution. Many of the displaced are indigenous groups uprooted from rural to urban areas and forced to flee again from one urban *barrio* to another in search of security and survival.... Internally displaced people (IDPs), particularly women, girls and adolescents, experience horrendous reproductive health problems in Colombia. Gender-based violence (GBV), including rape followed by murder, sexual servitude,

forced contraception and abortions, is perpetrated by armed actors, is extensive and is largely unaddressed. In addition to GBV inflicted by armed actors, the situation is desperate for some families; the team heard of some instances of girls and boys being sexually exploited by their parents or turning to prostitution for family survival needs. The assessment team learned from IDP women that domestic violence is a major problem, exacerbated by the difficult living situation for IDPs.

"The prevalence of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) among IDPs is unknown but anecdotal reports from government and UNFPA representatives suggest that it is very high. In some indigenous communities, health providers, unable to reach men for adequate treatment, have admitted pregnant women to the hospital to prevent them from becoming re-infected and to prevent mother-to-child transmission. This mobile population living among armed

actors and on the whole without access to medical care is in danger of an explosion of STIs, including HIV.

"The circumstances for adolescent IDPs [are] dire, and very little is being done to recognize their specific needs and capacities. Unable to cope with their circumstances or enticed by drug traffickers infiltrating urban barrios, many young boys turn to drugs, alcohol and theft. Some adolescent girls seek solace and comfort in motherhood, while others would prefer to avoid or delay pregnancy, suggesting a need, currently unmet, for family planning. A recent study by Profamilia indicated that 30 per cent of adolescent IDPs were already mothers or pregnant with their first child, a percentage nearly twice that of adolescents in Colombia's general population in 2000."

Source: http://www.womenscommission.org/pdf/co_rh.pdf, accessed March 2008.

Culturally Sensitive Approaches, Gender Relations and Armed Conflicts

Culturally sensitive approaches are especially critical in contexts of armed conflicts. They are important for addressing the gaps in policy that United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 outlines, as well as those noted in concerns expressed about the progress on the resolution.

CULTURALLY SENSITIVE APPROACHES ARE ESSENTIAL FOR UNDERSTANDING MEN AND WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES IN ARMED CONFLICTS.

There is sufficient evidence that social constructions of masculinity can worsen gender relations during periods of war. For example, some analysts argue that violence against women in northern Uganda was in some cases the outcome of feelings of emasculation and frustration:

men's experiences do not match cultural expectations of masculinity, which require that they provide for the material needs of their wives and children, as well as physical protection. War worsens the already poor structural conditions. Unable to fulfil their expected roles, men take out their frustrations on the women whom they have failed: "It is generally assumed that women differ from men, that they are weaker, incapable, a burden, a position legitimized by the biblical story in Genesis that man was created first, woman from his rib, and the saying that women are the weaker vessels...."¹⁹

Similarly, focus groups among women in camps in Kenya revealed that domestic violence increased during conflicts as men, frustrated by lack of employment, cramped living conditions, inability to provide for their families, women's lack of desire for sex and other challenges, punished women and children for their own unease.²⁰

28 UNSC RESOLUTION 1325 (2000):

Expresses concern that civilians, particularly women and children, account for the vast majority of those adversely affected by armed conflict, including as refugees and internally displaced persons, and increasingly are targeted by combatants and armed elements, and [recognizes] the consequent impact this has on durable peace and reconciliation,

Reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building, and stressing the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, and the need to increase their role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution,

Reaffirms also the need to implement fully international humanitarian and human rights law that protects the rights of women and girls during and after conflicts,

Emphasizes the need for all parties to ensure that mine clearance and mine awareness programmes take into account the special needs of women and girls,

Recognizes the urgent need to mainstream a gender perspective into peacekeeping operations, and in this regard noting the Windhoek Declaration and the Namibia Plan of Action on Mainstreaming a Gender Perspective in Multidimensional Peace Support Operations (S/2000/693),

Recognizes also the importance of the recommendation contained in the statement of its President to the press of 8 March 2000 for specialized training for all peacekeeping personnel on the protection, special needs and human rights of women and children in conflict situations,

Recognizes that an understanding of the impact of armed conflict on women and girls, effective institutional arrangements to guarantee

their protection, and full participation in the peace process can significantly contribute to the maintenance and promotion of international peace and security,

The resolution, therefore, calls on Member States “to ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict; encourages the Secretary-General to ... call for an increase in the participation of women at decision-making [and operational] levels in conflict resolution and peace processes; expresses its willingness to incorporate a gender perspective into peacekeeping operations and urges the Secretary-General to ensure that, where appropriate, field operations include a gender component, [including by ensuring that training is provided].”

The resolution calls on all actors involved, when negotiating and implementing peace agreements, to adopt a gender perspective, including, *inter alia*: (a) The special needs of women and girls during repatriation and resettlement and for rehabilitation, reintegration and post-conflict reconstruction; (b) Measures that support local women’s peace initiatives and indigenous processes for conflict resolution, and that involve women in all of the implementation mechanisms of the peace agreements; (c) Measures that ensure the protection of and respect for human rights of women and girls, particularly as they relate to the constitution, the electoral system, the police and the judiciary. It also calls upon all parties to armed conflict to respect fully international law applicable to the rights and protection of women and girls as civilians ... [and] to take special measures to protect

women and girls from gender-based violence, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse, and all other forms of violence in situations of armed conflict. It emphasizes the responsibility of all States to put an end to impunity and to prosecute those responsible for genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes including those relating to sexual violence against women and girls, and in this regard, stresses the need to exclude these crimes, where feasible, from amnesty provisions. [Additionally, it] calls upon all parties to armed conflict to respect the civilian and humanitarian character of refugee camps and settlements, and to take into account the particular needs of women and girls, including in their design, and recalls its resolution 1208 of 19 November 1998; and encourages all those involved in the planning for disarmament, demobilization and reintegration to consider the different needs of female and male ex-combatants and to take into account the needs of their dependants.

29 RECONSTRUCTION AND TRANSFORMATION

A particularly effective programme was developed in Central America to help an estimated 45,000 Guatemalans who fled a civil war in the 1980s and sought refuge in Mexico. When women demanded a voice in negotiations to return home, UNHCR funded projects to develop women's rights, combat their illiteracy and improve health services and leadership skills.

Women were directly involved in repatriation negotiations, and among the concessions they won was recognition, for the first time, of the principle of equal ownership of both private and communal property. Although it took a decade of work, it is enshrined in Guatemalan jurisprudence, benefiting the entire population.

Source: <http://www.unhcr.org/publ/PUBL/3e2d4d5511.pdf>, accessed August 2008.

Profemme Twese Hamwe is a women's collective formed in Rwanda in 1993. Through its peace and reconciliation programmes, it has made a substantial contribution to rebuilding society in Rwanda, following the 1994 genocide. One of the organization's major objectives is to facilitate "the structural transformation of Rwandan society by putting into place the political, material, economic and moral conditions favourable for the rehabilitation of social justice and equal opportunity, to build a real and durable peace." In addition, *Profemme Twese Hamwe* helps to build capacity among women through communication, information and education.

Source: www.profemme.org.rw, accessed August 2008.

Since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, women have contributed significantly to reconstruction and to maintaining social stability. A variety of women's associations have flourished to address practical needs and to provide for education and training and income generation.

Source: Al-Ali, N. 2007. "Iraqi Women: Four Years After the Invasion." Silver City, New Mexico, and Washington, D.C.: Foreign Policy In Focus. <http://fpif.org/fpiftxt/4055>. Accessed August 2008.

Though women are often portrayed as vulnerable and victimized, Ethiopian women have had a long history of being involved in resisting invading forces, maintaining societies during periods of armed conflict and contributing to peacebuilding and post-conflict rehabilitation.

Source: Mulugeta Tefera, E. 2005. "The Invincible Invisibles: Ethiopian Women in Conflict and Peacemaking." Addis Ababa: University for Peace.

This knowledge demonstrates the need for livelihood opportunities in addition to strategies for exposing, challenging and changing the cultural perceptions, norms and practices that underpin gender inequalities and gender-based violence; and the need for other psychosocial initiatives that deal with how men and women perceive themselves and their roles.

Culturally sensitive approaches recognize that men and women exercise power in varied and unexpected ways and that these variations are important for understanding how cultures – shared understandings or systems of meaning – shift and change; what types of culturally sensitive policies are needed for promoting human rights and the spaces that exist, or may be

According to women in Mombasa, "When sexual desire has gone down, physical violence goes up." Other women agreed that in the camps, a father "is as good as a child" and "when the husband is not working, he becomes part of the children," for whom the women are responsible. In at least three camps, incidents of domestic violence requiring police intervention had already been noted.²¹

emerging, for change. For example, the common perception of women as victims and men as aggressors does not always describe what happens during wars.²² It is now well established that women, as in Liberia, may take part in combat, and that not all men are aggressors. Women have taken part in independence struggles, for example, but

this has not automatically translated into equal opportunities and access to decision-making positions once the conflict is over. Recognition of these variations is important for checking popular representations of men's and women's roles in armed and post-conflict situations as well as the unfortunate labelling of people's capacities. This has, in turn, important policy implications.

Assumptions of vulnerability are often used to justify top-down,

30 THE GIRL CHILD AND ARMED CONFLICT: RECOGNIZING AND ADDRESSING GRAVE VIOLATIONS OF GIRLS' HUMAN RIGHTS

During armed conflict, girls are subject to widespread and, at times, systematic forms of human rights violations that have mental, emotional, spiritual, physical and material repercussions. These violations include illegal detention with or without family members, abduction and forced removal from families and homes, disappearances, torture and other inhuman treatment, amputation and mutilation, forced recruitment into fighting forces and groups, slavery, sexual exploitation, increased exposure to HIV and AIDS, and a wide range of physical and sexual violations, including rape, enforced pregnancy, forced prostitution, forced marriage and forced childbearing.

There is urgent need for better documentation, monitoring and reporting on the extreme suffering that armed conflict inflicts on girls, as well as on the many roles girls play during conflict and its aftermath. Such information and response mechanisms are needed for the purpose of strengthening and developing policy and programs to prevent and/or address these grave rights violations.

Source: Paper prepared by Mazurana, D. and K. Carlson for the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women and UNICEF's Expert Group Meeting on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination and Violence Against the Girl Child, Florence: 25-28 September 2008.

needs-assessment interventions, which can “blind the aid administrator to the resilience and resourcefulness” of people affected by armed conflicts and “limit livelihood and reconstruction options”.²³ Conversely, knowledge of who people are, how they make sense of their lives, how they work to tame armed conflicts, how they deliver services, and what has changed as a result of the conflict is indispensable for locating and supporting local initiatives and indigenous processes.

Impact, Analysis, Response

People's experience during armed conflict depends on factors such as ethnicity, race, gender, class, age, faith and culture. Culturally sensitive approaches are important for understanding how these “intersectionalities” play out, analysing the impact of armed conflict on different categories of people, and responding with policies focused on specific needs.

“In all wars and disasters, it is persons with disabilities that are first to die; persons with disabilities that are the first to get disease and infection; and it is persons with disabilities who are the last to get resources and medicines when they are handed out. They are treated as the bottom of the pile.”²⁴

A. IDENTIFYING SPECIFIC NEEDS

Culturally based discrimination against women, girls, minorities and those with disabilities may be intensified during wartime, and even the most serious violations may go unchecked. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, men targeted Batwa women for sex, believing that if a man had sex with a Batwa woman, he would be cured of HIV and protected from death by bullets, and that his spinal cord could never be broken. Some of these women were captured and kept as sexual slaves, and some were cannibalized.²⁵ In the Basilian region of the Philippines, violence against women escalated during the period of conflict from 2000 to 2003. Their communities considered raped women unclean, and they were forced to marry the soldiers who had raped them.²⁶

People with disabilities, particularly women and children, can suffer significantly worse forms of human rights abuses in wartime. Over 80 per cent of the estimated 600 million people living with disabilities live in developing countries, and large numbers have been displaced by armed conflict. With cultural knowledge and engagement, their experiences are identified and more tailored interventions constructed.²⁷

B. PROVIDING URGENT SERVICES

Cultural knowledge is critical for providing emergency sexual and reproductive health services to refugees and other populations during periods of war. With cultural knowledge, external agencies can help providers identify needs, the channels most likely to be effective and the essential partnerships.

Women's unique health needs, including all aspects of sexual and reproductive health, become more difficult to meet in wartime. The inadequacy or absence of obstetric

Because they relate to such an intimate sphere of life, reproductive health interventions must be delivered with great care and cultural sensitivity. Programmes must be particularly sensitive to religious and ethical values and cultural backgrounds of the refugee population. Providing comprehensive reproductive care also often requires careful coordination among several agencies.²⁸

services, contraception or protection from sexually transmitted infection can threaten women's health and survival. Stress, inadequate nutrition and poor hygiene compromise pregnancy and delivery. The risk of sexual violence and exploitation increases.

It is critical to provide immediate and effective emergency services and supplies, including basic obstetric care. Working with individuals and groups in the heart of the conflict is important for success. Front-line agencies should be aware of women's specific needs for reproductive health care, and target them deliberately as partners in service delivery. Health-care providers need awareness and training to ensure the best possible perinatal care; availability of condoms and other contraceptives; voluntary HIV counselling and testing, during which HIV prevention is stressed; measures to prevent transmission of HIV from mother to baby; as well as post-partum care designed to substantially reduce the number of maternal deaths. Beyond providing supplies and supporting facilities, UNFPA-supported programmes emphasize life skills education, including information for women and girls on how to protect themselves against sexually transmitted infections such as HIV, and specialized information and support for adolescents. UNFPA also develops a broad range of alliances with government, humanitarian agencies and local organizations to provide services, including psychological support, to survivors of sexual violence.²⁹

Young Guatemalan girl at the end of a brief civil war. ▶

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C. BUILDING EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS

Culturally sensitive approaches are crucial for building effective partnerships, particularly during periods of war. For example, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) has been supporting inter-religious dialogue in order to promote peacebuilding. In the Mindanao area of the Philippines, the organization has been working to facilitate dialogue between Christian and Muslim leaders. In Pakistan, CRS has been using the teachings of Islam and Christianity to encourage forgiveness, peacebuilding and reconciliation. In addition, CRS supported a millennial inter-faith peace walk in Pakistan, and, in Cameroon, it is supporting citizen education, conflict resolution and peacebuilding programmes.³⁰ Similarly, Islamic Relief Services is collaborating with the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD) to support children in the Gaza Strip who are traumatized by violence.³¹ In northern Uganda,



*Freedom to express cultural identity can be a powerful way to maintain a community's mental and physical health. Freedom of expression is also a right and, as our language of assistance moves from needs-based to rights-based, respect for the empowering forms of cultural expression should inform our thinking and planning.*³²

*For all populations – those women who remain in their war-torn communities, those who return to their communities after being displaced and those forced to flee – the most effective psychosocial programmes work within the culture or across cultures to provide services that re-establish and strengthen community ties destroyed by war and displacement.*³⁵

Anglican, Catholic, Muslim and Orthodox religious leaders have formed the Acholi Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative to facilitate reconciliation in terms that people will understand and respect culturally. This has had unintended benefits: "In the past, it was difficult to get an Anglican reverend like me together with a sister from the Catholic Church.... But right now, the local religious leaders are working together, and that alone is a very big step."³³

Partnerships are important for providing critical psychosocial support to victims of sexual violence. This involves working with health-care providers, the police and legislators so that survivors can be treated with the care that is rightfully theirs. Beyond this, it calls for alliances with advocates of legal reform, who aim for better policing and stringent punishment for violators. It also entails tackling gender relations, for example, ensuring that women have appropriate and influential positions in the design of humanitarian assistance, peacekeeping and peacebuilding.

Given the depth of cultural opposition to women in leadership, this can be an enormous challenge. The experience of an array of women's organizations and women leaders working in these harsh environments shows that peace agreements, post-conflict reconstruction, governance and security are more effective when

women participate; but these processes still rarely include women.³⁶

Women are critical partners in all successful programmes, not only as leaders but in helping each other, often in ways not open to external actors. In the IDP camps of South Darfur, for example, UNFPA is supporting centres which are "safe zones" where women meet and share their knowledge and their experiences with health and violence issues.

*"Women are coming here to talk about their problems," Awatif says. "When you are just one person, it is your problem alone. When you tell [your problems] to a lot of women, it becomes all of their problems."*³⁷

D. RECOVERING CULTURE, RECOVERING SELF

Development organizations have found that the ability to express cultural identities may help people recover from the trauma of war: "Enabling displaced people to retain all that remains of their distinct personhood may be vital for their future, for their health, for holding them together as a community, and for maintaining or restoring their dignity after the trauma of exile."³⁸ Practitioners explain that beyond encouraging people to express their culture, drawing on the cultural expressions that people know and understand can make services more effective. For example,

*Culturally-informed psychosocial interventions that improve women's social networks and economic opportunities contribute to the sense of calm and stability that must exist before we can truly address and resolve the horrors experienced in conflict, and assist women and their communities in moving toward a peaceful future.*³⁴

31 4 APRIL 2008, KINSHASA, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

In mid-March hundreds of Congolese women, men and girls raised banners that read: "Together, let us say No to the silence, for the dignity of the Congolese" and "Enough sexual violence!" With faces of determination, the women, men and girls waved these slogans high above their heads. More than 1,000 Congolese authorities and civilians, UN leaders, NGOs and civil society groups were gathered in Kinkole, a suburb of Kinshasa, to kick off a nationwide public awareness campaign aimed to eradicate an epidemic of sexual violence. An average of 1,100 rape cases are reported each month, according to UNFPA, "Sexual violence constitutes a plague in the DRC," said Dr. Margaret Agama, the UNFPA representative in the country. "Initially, rape was used as a tool of war by all the belligerent forces involved in the country's recent conflicts, but now sexual violence is unfortunately not only perpetrated by armed factions but also

by ordinary people occupying positions of authority, neighbours, friends and family members."

In January, the signing of a peace deal officially ended the conflicts that have raged in the country for a decade. Thus, the campaign organized by UNFPA along with the national Ministry of Women, Family and Children came at an important time, as communities work to rebuild infrastructures and reintegrate over 1 million people displaced by the conflicts. The campaign raised the level of awareness on sexual violence throughout the national and international communities and united authorities, neighbours, survivors, friends and family members in its elimination.... The need to end impunity is a main message in the UNFPA-led campaign and has also become a key agenda for the country's leaders. In February, the Congolese Minister for Women, Family and Protection of the

Child, Philomène Omatuku, declared to the public, "I would say from now on that we women of the DRC, we say no to sexual violence, no to impunity. The Congolese women require peace."

The intensive, multi-faceted campaign to raise awareness and sensitize key actors at all levels took place in the 11 provinces of the DRC for one month. A wide range of communication channels – including media outlets, theatre, open telephone lines, films and video forums and debates – were being used to reach out to all, including the Government and the diplomatic community. The campaign also relied on the authority of recognized moral community leaders to influence public opinion.

Source: <http://www.unfpa.org/news/news.cfm?ID=1113>, accessed June 2008.

the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has used art, drama, music and dance to help displaced children recover in places as different as Kosovo, Colombia, Sri Lanka, Algeria, Croatia and Rwanda.³⁹ The most effective strategy for helping Sudanese women refugees is to strengthen communities and build social and cultural networks. In Afghanistan, practitioners advise against using Western-based diagnoses and treatments to alleviate traumas suffered by women in conflict. Instead, they suggest that cultural fluency (knowing the language of the culture) is important for understanding what women have gone through and what they need to recover.⁴⁰ In Aceh Province, Indonesia, displaced women require support that incorporates their Muslim faith and recognizes cultural approaches to grieving. Acehnese women believe that prolonged grieving holds back their loved ones' souls from reaching God; they want practical help such as e

ducation and training to build their futures, not lengthy discussions of trauma and grief. Only culturally sensitive approaches can uncover and respond to such particularities of need.

Negotiating Cultures Within Development Organizations

Cultural awareness and engagement are as important in development organizations themselves as in their national and local working contexts. Staff members' own cultural perceptions may affect their approaches to their work. Culturally sensitive approaches demand attention to the ways in which interventions aimed at conflict prevention, humanitarian assistance, peacekeeping and peacebuilding influence gender relations and culture.

UNFPA, for instance, is working to build an organizational culture ready to respond to human rights abuses

and promote gender equality in conflict situations. Through its work, it has found that the most effective interventions emerge through dialogue, developing strategic partnerships with people committed to change and building on local initiatives. Development workers in their own societies normally have intimate knowledge of what is practicable at different points in time; they know about the processes required for change and the tools and methods most likely to work. However, strategic partnerships require commitment and time. They develop best where everyone in the partnership recognizes that people have different ways of thinking and deserve mutual recognition and respect. Development agencies are increasingly finding and using the most effective symbols and forms of communication for transmitting messages in different cultures. Rather than convey agency-conceptualized messages about behaviour change, agencies engage with communities, using varied cultural forms of communication such as songs, dance and

We have taken the lessons to strengthen working relationships with communities and local social, political, cultural and religious leaders, engaging them in dialogue, listening to them, sharing knowledge and insights, jointly planning the way forward and moving ahead. UNFPA is set on a path of systematically mainstreaming cultural factors in programming efforts in order to make greater progress and affirm human rights.

—Thoraya Ahmed Obaid, Executive Director, UNFPA

drama to open conversations and involve people in building strategies for tackling rights abuses and promoting gender equality in ways suited to their contexts.

32 MEN'S LEADERSHIP PROGRAMME

"My name is Kayembe Tshibangu, head of Mushumune Commune in Bagira, Bukavu city. I am a father of five. I was a normal man, living with my family in a normal way. I behaved like every man within the society. My wife was a slave to me, she had no rights and had to respect me absolutely. She was always in the home, and could not go out to meet other women. She belonged to me, because at our marriage, I paid a bride-price — the dowry, which gave me all the authority to treat her as I wished. She was at my mercy for sexual activity, anytime, anyplace, anywhere. Refusal went with punishment. I was a complete tyrant in my home. When I arrived at home the children and everyone ran away, because the 'lion' had arrived. It was a complete and absolute dictatorship. This was because I did not know any alternative way of living.

"After 18th August 2005, the day of encounter with the Men's Leadership

Program of Women for Women International, things changed completely. I was converted and took on a new life. Even my children and family asked what had happened to me. They could not believe it. It was too good to be true! They thought it was a dream, and it would go away after some time, like a mirage. No, never again will I go back to my old self. My family members and I are now friends, comrades. We talk and laugh together, and there is peace in the home. No more tears, no more sorrow. My wife has become my friend. I now listen to her and take her advice. Like a true convert, I want my other friends to learn what I had learned. So I go from house to house, together with my wife and children to dialogue with other households. When they see us, they are shocked and surprised, and want to listen to what had brought about the new image, the change. Invariably they are also touched and the change process

goes on and on. Some people do not accept the message of change on the first encounter. As a follow-up strategy, we divide ourselves: husband to husband; wife to wife; children to children. We adopt a one-on-one approach. There is constant interaction at the household level. So far, we have touched the lives of 58 families, but the work goes on and on."

Source: Women for Women International. 2007. "Ending Violence Against Women in Eastern Congo: Preparing Men to Advocate for Women's Rights," p. 22. Washington, D.C.: Women for Women International. http://www.womenforwomen.org/news-women-for-women/files/MensLeadershipFullReport_002.pdf