

Wartime Rape: The Powerful Must Help the Powerless

Katie Basile

Have you ever heard the old adage, “Out of sight, out of mind?” These six words can literally mean the difference between life and death for hundreds of thousands of women and girls across the globe.

Throughout history – and most notably in the past fifty years - women and girls around the world have been attacked, tortured, raped, and murdered in the name of war. These traumatic events have been documented in armed conflicts in countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Peru, Guatemala, Rwanda, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Vietnam, Cyprus, Haiti, Liberia, Somalia and Uganda – to name just a few. Most recently, there have been reports of wartime rape occurring in Syria. Our news accounts of Syria tend to focus on the civil war and the casualties of the fighting. However, this conflict has a more insidious side; the rapes of civilian women are creating a nation of traumatized civilians – not just the women who are the direct victims of the attacks, but the children who may have witnessed these savage attacks on their mothers.

Despite the thousands upon thousands of women being savagely attacked around the world, the United States and other countries have done relatively little to bring attention to these atrocities. Moreover, if asked, most private citizens would say that the plight of women in war-torn areas of the world is unfortunate, terrible - unconscionable even – but then the topic is changed and forgotten. So, why should American citizens, especially women, care about what happens to other women who live thousands of miles away?

There are at least four reasons.

First, rape is one of the few forms of violence in which the terrorized victims are habitually blamed. The stigma and shame of wartime rape attaches itself to women, men, children, and entire communities which makes it an incredibly efficient way of destroying families and undermining opposing forces in times of war.

Second, mass rape is a sensitive matter and shames the victims; subsequently, they are oftentimes very reluctant to report it or talk about it.

Third, because wartime rape attracts less international attention than other wartime strategies – such as the use of chemical weapons, for instance - criminal consequences are rarely imposed upon the perpetrators of these crimes.

Lastly, the suffering of women and girls who have been victims of wartime rape deserve acknowledgment, the restoration of dignity, and the realization that their pain matters to others.

If we are to consider ourselves “civilized” and “ethical” Americans, we are also duty-bound to take some sort of action. There are several ways in which private citizens can bring the topic of wartime rape to the forefront of public consciousness.

- Write an op-ed piece detailing a victim’s story. Discuss the consequences of wartime rape for both women and their families.

- Write to your congressman or congresswoman expressing your interest in seeing more governmental action regarding wartime rape. Let them know that there should be:
 - ~ a greater attempt to accurately number the victims of mass rape. Getting information on the number of wartime rape victims is difficult due to the danger of operating in worn-torn areas. Another hindrance to reporting is cultural and religious beliefs because a woman's virginity is closely linked to "honor" and "piety" – for the victim and her family. In some cases, the shame of the ordeal is so great, the victim has committed suicide. If the global public understood the magnitude of the problem and became involved, these victims could be better supported.
 - ~ a greater attempt to catalogue the number and types of injuries suffered by victims of wartime rape. If better data was collected and analyzed, improved methods of medical and psychological care and intervention would become available to victims.
 - ~ grave consequences for military forces that engage in wartime rape practices. Our government must publicly name and publicly shame any military force engaging in wartime rape or any commander that tolerates such practices. All aid, if any, from our government should cease.
 - ~ a serious and intensive effort by our government to assist in the apprehension of alleged perpetrators of wartime rape. We must also use our influence with other governments to ensure that those convicted of these crimes are punished appropriately.
 - ~ leadership on the part of the U.S. government to influence other countries to support armed groups conditional on their human rights records – and to withdraw said support if soldiers are reported to rape.
- Lastly, you can make a donation to those groups which provide political, economic, medical, and/or psychological aid to victims of wartime rape. Better yet, join an organization and become actively involved. Feel free to do your own research, but sites like "Stop Rape Now: UN Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict" might be a good start. This site lists several organizations that are vigorously supporting wartime rape victims. You can find their website at: <http://www.stoprapenow.org/ngo-links/>

It is imperative that those of us with power help the powerless. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, a young, 28 year old woman named Jeanna Mukuninwa described her ordeal thusly, "At least with a bullet, you die. But if you have been raped, you appear to the community like someone who is cursed. After rape, no one will talk to you; no man will see you. It's a living death." We cannot allow victims of wartime rape to believe the world has forgotten them.

Katie Basile is currently a non-traditional student who will graduate from East Carolina University with a Bachelor of Science degree in Sociology on May 6, 2016. She will be pursuing an MA in Sociology at the same university immediately upon receiving her undergraduate degree. Katie is planning to teach Sociology courses at the post-secondary level after she earns her Master's degree and is excited about the prospect of introducing students to a broad range of social issues and concerns. Her hope is to inspire the next generation to seek social justice and equality for all those who cannot speak for themselves.