

Rape in war 'a deliberate military strategy' argue researchers

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Since the second world war, the use of rape as a weapon of war has assumed strategic importance, and is now a deliberate military strategy, argue researchers in an editorial published in the British Medical Journal today.

The effects of [rape](#) and [sexual violence](#) during [war](#) also extend beyond individual victims and are economically, physically, psychologically, and culturally devastating for families and communities, say authors Coleen Kivlahan, volunteer forensic physician for HealthRight International, and Nate Ewigman from the University of Florida.

For example, in recent conflicts, rape has been used as a reward for victory in battle, a boost to troop morale, as punishment and humiliation for both men and women, to incite revenge in opposing troops, to eliminate or "cleanse" religious or political groups, and to destabilise entire communities by creating terror.

A study in the [Democratic Republic of the Congo](#) found that 16,000 rapes occurred in 2008 alone, and in South Kivu province, health centres estimate that 40 women were raped in the region daily. In the United Kingdom, 50-70% of female asylum applicants were raped, witnessed rape, or have a credible fear of rape.

Geographical, cultural, religious, political, legal, and behavioural conditions affect the likelihood of the systematic use of rape, explain the authors. For instance, geographically remote locations allow perpetrators

to rape with impunity, while the likelihood that women will be raped, shamed, and isolated is increased in cultures with strong traditions regarding virginity, marital fidelity, and genital cleanliness.

Religions with strong beliefs about appropriate female clothing and behaviour also increase the risk that women will be falsely accused of adultery and raped as humiliation and punishment, they add.

The effects of rape and sexual torture on survivors are economically, physically, psychologically, and culturally devastating. They also extend to the family and community.

The international community has mounted a considerable response to the use of rape as a weapon of war, but the authors argue that rape during armed conflict is not simply about military personnel, police, or terrorists.

For example, before 2004, rape assailants in the Democratic Republic of the Congo were primarily affiliated with the military; however, after 2004, civilian rapes increased 17-fold while rapes by armed combatants decreased by 77%.

"This pattern suggests a disturbing acceptance of rape among civilians," they conclude. "Rape is the result of the lack of dedicated societal attention to the safety, respect, and prosperity of women in peace time, as well as in war."

Provided by British Medical Journal

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