

Testimony of
Karin Wachter

April 1, 2008

Testimony of Karin Wachter Gender-Based Violence Technical Advisor, International Rescue Committee
Before the Subcommittee on Human Rights and the Law Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate

"Rape as a Weapon of War: Accountability for Sexual Violence in Conflict"
April 1, 2008

Please let me begin by saying that I feel extremely privileged to have been invited to speak with you all today. I bring to this hearing today first-hand experience working on the issue of violence against women and girls, and the insight gained through a decade lived on the African continent. I represent and speak from the perspective of a U.S.-based non-governmental humanitarian organization that has prioritized the problem of violence against women and girls in conflict and seeks to assure that they not only survive conflict, but ultimately thrive in times of peace.

Today, I will share with you my personal experience and thoughts on the subject. I will also strive to represent some of the voices and experiences of the hundreds of national and expatriate humanitarian workers devoted to this issue, many of whom are themselves civilian victims of war and displacement.

Above all, I wish I could share with you the voices, concerns and hopes of the tens of thousands of women and girls who come forward for help, having been assaulted, tortured, humiliated and disabled simply for having been born female and getting caught in the cross-fire of war.

I started working with the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in eastern Congo, where, already back in 2002, women were talking about not the one time they were brutally sexually assaulted, but about the third or fourth time. Many of them were abandoned by their husbands or families, often with the babies that were born as a result. It was at this time that the problem of rape-related fistula was first picked up on the international radar screen.

By the time I arrived in Burundi in early 2006, their war - notorious for its use of sexual Violence - was mainly over, but peer organizations such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) still had a constant stream of mothers bringing their daughters for post-rape care in the areas where the rebel army had settled down. Adult women were reluctant to seek help for themselves because they were afraid of the repercussions of doing so.

In May of 2007, I was in Northern Uganda. While the political situation was already stabilizing, sexual abuse and exploitation of adolescent and young girls were rampant in the camps. Within days of launching IRC's program, we saw more abused girls seeking help than anybody initially imagined possible.

In the past six years, I have seen firsthand the sexual and physical violence against women and girls in 10 different conflict-affected African countries. We would not be exaggerating to call this violence a global human rights, public health and security crisis. The perpetration of sexual violence is both a tactic of warfare, and an opportunistic consequence of conflict and displacement. They often go hand-in-hand. Either way, women's bodies become the frontline of an unnecessary and cruel battle.

As a weapon of war, sexual violence seeks to accomplish a larger objective than the individual act of rape itself. The systematic use of rape in war has many purposes, including ethnic cleansing, elimination, humiliation, or control and domination of target populations - based on their ethnicity, political affiliation, nationality or geographical location - and obviously their gender. Up to a half a million women were raped during the Rwandan genocide. We've seen this tactic or strategy used year in and year out in eastern Congo, where the national military and numerous rebel groups use brutal forms of sexual violence - in part to secure their own food and provisions from the rural population. It is domination through sexualized terror.

This form of warfare is so effective - and so open to being modified depending on the whim and depravity of the perpetrators - because while it is the bodies and spirits of women and girls that are directly trampled upon, sexual violence creates deep wounds and schisms within the target community. It destroys the fabric of a community in a way that few weapons can. It produces unwanted children, it spreads disease, and it leaves an imprint on the individual and collective psyche that is difficult to erase.

This strategic use of sexual violence is usually accompanied with a sharp increase in opportunistic rape, carried out not only by armed groups in an environment of impunity, but within the family or community as well. Societal norms that regulate behavior and afford some degree of protection to women break down during war, and give way to an 'anything and everything goes' mentality that can, over time, rub off on the affected population.

During conflict women and children make up the majority of the world's refugees and internally displaced persons. They are often separated from their nuclear and extended families. Necessary tasks for survival in areas of insecurity - such as firewood and water collection or farming, which are typically the work of females - increase their exposure to sexual violence on a daily basis. Sexual assault of women and girls engaged in foraging for basic survival needs has become so commonplace that in the field it is glibly referred to as "firewood rape".

While men and boys are affected by conflict in many terrible ways, women and girls are the ones who are predominantly raped, mutilated, abducted into sexual slavery, and sexually exploited during times of conflict. Let us not sugar-coat the reality we are talking about here - sexual violence is a form of torture.

During the Indonesian occupation (1975 - 2002), women in East Timor were subjected to the same human rights abuses the general Timorese population experienced, but were also targeted for rape, sexual harassment, enforced slavery, and were forced or coerced into prostitution to service the Indonesian military. Women who were associated (or assumed to be) with the East Timorese resistance movement were particularly targeted for violence carried out by the state. In

the post-referendum violence, the militia groups continued to perpetrate these forms of violence against women.

It has been said that it was the Bosnian war that woke up the international community to the ways in which war and conflict are inherently gendered experiences. Tens of thousands of Bosnian women and girls were subjected to egregious acts of violence-- raped in front of their family members, forced into sexual servitude, impregnated, forced into rape camps, and subjected to genital mutilation.

All over the world, the consequences of sexual violence are far-reaching. Survivors are exposed to and suffer from serious and debilitating short- and long-term social and physical and mental health and economic consequences, including: death, severe injuries, fistula, sexually transmitted infections, HIV/AIDS, and unwanted pregnancy; impaired function, anxiety, fear, shame, post-traumatic stress, hopelessness, and suicide; rejection and stigmatization by families and communities, extreme isolation and increased economic hardship.

In many contexts, rape means a girl's or woman's chances to marry are greatly diminished. Without the relative security and status that marriage provides in traditional societies, women are left vulnerable and further exposed to sexual and physical exploitation. And you can only imagine what it does to a family to watch your daughter gang-raped, or your wife's pregnant belly sliced open, or your son obliged to hold down his sister while soldiers force you to violate her.

The physical, psychological and social consequences of this kind of violence are very real and often go untreated. The effects of this type of wide-spread sexualized terror on the family and community have long-term implications for a nation's capacity to heal and rebuild after war.

And unfortunately, for women and girls, the threat of violence remains long after fighting ends. We know that reporting rates for sexual abuse in contexts emerging from war in which sexual violence was systematically used by armed forces will remain high - but that the perpetrators will often be the members of the community itself. Crippled, corrupt or destroyed justice systems do little to dissuade civilians from abusing their relative degree of power and control.

Once having escaped the conflict, women may be forced to exchange sex for survival and protection of their children. During protracted humanitarian crises, women also face a growing threat of physical, sexual and economic abuse within their own households.

It is difficult for people to understand that the survivors of these atrocities will continue to come forward even once the war ends, and sometimes en masse. In times of relative calm, access to services improves and women and girls who have suffered for years as result of an attack - or multiple attacks - come forward when it becomes possible and safe to do so. Currently, women in eastern Congo have to walk for days to reach health services, and frequently are subjected to attacks again during their journey to seek help. Access to life-saving services is a prevailing problem in the rural contexts affected by war due to the absence of infrastructure, resources and lack of capacity.

In protracted refugee situations, such as the Burundians in Tanzania or the Burmese in Thailand, we see the male refugee population idle and disenfranchised, and rates of physical violence in the home rise the longer they are in camps.

The situation in West Africa is just as concerning. Since the end of the wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, service providers and police have seen an increase in reports of violence. Survivors report incidents of sexual violence perpetrated by intimate partners, neighbors, and friends. They report incidents of domestic violence, experiences with forced and early marriage, and female genital mutilation.

In Sierra Leone, in 2007 alone, 1176 girls and women sought care for sexual or physical violence at IRC centers . . . 65% of those cases were under the age of 15. . . 64% of those cases were rape or gang-rape . . . the youngest client was two months old.

A recent study conducted by the IRC and Columbia University in Liberia (August 2007) indicated that violence against women and girls is dramatically widespread. In the study population: 55% of the women surveyed had experienced domestic violence; 30% of all women seeking medical attention have experienced domestic violence; 72% of women reported that their husbands had forced them to have sex in the last 18 months; and, 13% of minors in one county and 11% of minors in another county had been sexually abused in the last 18 months.

Please let me assure you that at the bottom of all of this suffering is in fact a message of hope.

1. Given what we know about the relationship between conflict and sexual violence, the burden-of-proof for sexual violence in humanitarian emergencies should be to provide evidence that rape is in fact not rampant. The international community now maintains that sexual violence is to be assumed in all humanitarian emergencies - including natural disasters. The humanitarian community - United Nations and NGOs alike - has made great strides in developing industry standards and guidelines for establishing the response to conflict-related sexual violence in humanitarian emergencies. At this point, we know what it takes to launch an effective response and we know how to monitor the quality of that response; what is harder is deploying the necessary technical expertise, given the relatively limited pool of humanitarian aid workers specializing in violence against women in conflict.

In addition, we have made good progress in gaining the commitment and buy-in from key American donors - the State Department's Bureau for Population, Refugees and Migration (BPRM) and USAID - to allocate much needed resources to this crucial issue. We still have a long way to go. An increase in resources translates into being able to hit the ground faster and more effectively to set-up life-saving services and start advocacy efforts at the onset of an emergency. The United States has a key role to play in promoting the allocation of resources to stop violence against women in war and to ease the suffering of its innocent victims.

2. Violence against women in conflict is now commonly understood by the international community as a violation of basic human rights. The understanding of a state's responsibility to protect women from violence has evolved considerably. Senator Biden and Senator Lugar recently introduced bipartisan legislation - the International Violence Against Women Act

(IVAWA, S.2279) - which would make violence against women a key priority in U.S. foreign assistance programs.

The legislation is of vital importance for the hundreds of thousands of women and girls affected by violence. In recognition of how violence against women is exacerbated by conflict and continues long thereafter, the IVAWA bill is designed to address the issue in war-torn, post-conflict and development setting. Those of us working day in and day out on this issue anxiously wait for this piece of legislation to be passed.

Addressing violence against women in conflict is smart foreign policy and the American people care more about this issue than we may think. When the IRC launched a web-based petition to help garner support for the IVAWA bill, a surprisingly high number of the 50,000 Americans who signed the petition also wrote a personal note, expressing their sincere concern about violence against women and girls in conflict. This unexpected outpouring of concern led us to launch a modest e-advocacy campaign, in which the general public was invited to write words of encouragement to Congolese women and the local activists and organizations working to assist them. Within 10 days of launching the campaign, we had 2,779 people who wrote messages of support in response to the crisis in DRC.

Please permit me to share two examples of what people wrote:

A woman from New York wrote: "There are few words that can express the nature of the horrible wrongs which you face every day. We all have the right to safety and respect. Continue to speak out of the injustices and the violations of your souls. We are listening..."

A man from Virginia wrote: "We are writing our leaders and sending funds to help. I have also included your story in my blog. I hope that we can make a difference. I am remembering you when I vote and write Congress. I hope that the U.S. can become a force to help you in the Congo."

3. The United States has the opportunity to rally member states within the United Nations system on increasing attention and commitment to preventing sexual violence in conflict and responding effectively to the survivors. Above all, we look to the United Nations for sustained action - in ensuring effective humanitarian coordination as it relates to sexual violence in conflict; in promoting the accountability of nation states in which sexual violence goes unchecked; and, to help ensure the presence of women at the table during peace talks and reconstruction efforts.

The irony we face in this line of work is that conflict can open the door to address what is without fail a pervasive and very taboo subject matter. Over time, we see the effects of our work - we see the numbers of women and girls receiving essential services increase dramatically. We see local activists and local women's groups learn how to approach survivors' needs holistically and help to get them the care that they need. Local health professionals learn to overcome their own biases and misconceptions about sexual violence and begin to treat survivors with the care, compassion and privacy they deserve. And the violence and suffering that women and girls have been quietly handling alone begin to be discussed as an issue that affects the entire community.

We see women find their voice, first amongst other women, and then within the community - to speak about the issues they face and how they envision a life free from violence for themselves

and their children. We see men take interest and start to take action within their own families and their communities at large. Sometimes, as in Liberia or Sierra Leone, we even see laws and policies that discriminate against survivors of sexual violence start to change.

I thank Chairman Durbin, Ranking Member Coburn and the Members of the Subcommittee for your time and interest in this worthwhile cause. Sexual violence and its extreme consequences do not have to be an inevitable component of conflict and displacement.

The women and girls from conflict zones are waiting for the chance to heal and live free from the threat of violence. The U.S. government can help make that hope a reality for women and girls around the world. We look to you for action.