



Are Women Human?

Violence Against Women and Girls

Carol Rittner RSM
Deirdre Mullan RSM



Violence Against Women and Girls

Catherine McAuley, the founder of the Sisters of Mercy, once said,

“The poor need help today, not next week.”

Mercy Global Concern, the Mercy office at the United Nations in New York City, echoes Catherine’s words in saying,



“Women and girls around the world who suffer gender-based violence need help today, not next week.”

In the spirit of Catherine McAuley and animated by the Gospel and Catherine’s passion for the poor, “we commit our lives and resources to act in solidarity with:

- the economically poor of the world, especially women and children; and,
- women seeking fullness of life and equality in church and society.”

Foreword

Studies in the last ten years sponsored by both the United Nations and the World Health Organization make it undeniably clear that violence against women is a global problem of staggering proportion and urgency. Whether in the West or East, North or global South, women are at risk both at home and in society, in intimate partnerships, the workplace and major institutions large and small. However hard it is for any of us to understand this, it is estimated that one in every five women faces some form of violence during her lifetime – all too often leading to serious injury or death.

The UN defines violence against women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.” The facts presented and stories told in *Are Women Human? Violence Against Women and Girls* should constitute a wake-up call for all of us. This publication by Mercy Global Concern goes a long way toward clarifying and concretely dramatizing the plight of women in a world that still fails to recognize fully the consequences of gender inequality, violation of human rights and ignorance of the depths of human suffering among us.

No longer can any of us be complacent about stark issues of the dangers to women in contexts ranging from date rape to tribal vengeance to human trafficking to rape as a systematic weapon of war. I for one am extremely grateful for *Are Women Human?* and it is my hope that it will be widely used as an educational resource, an important contribution to the making of every corner of our world safer for women.

Margaret A. Farley, RSM

Gilbert L. Stark Professor Emerita of Christian Ethics, Yale University Divinity School

Violence Against Women and Girls

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states that:

- “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights...”
- “Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person...”
- “No one shall be held in slavery or servitude...”
- “No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment...” and,
- “Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.”

And yet, given the situation and experience of too many women all over the world, some people persist in raising the question, “Are women human?”

Perhaps you think this is a ridiculous question. “Of course women are human,” you say. And yet,

If women were human, would we be a cash crop shipped from Thailand in containers into New York’s brothels? Would we be sexual and reproductive slaves? Would we be bred, worked without pay our whole lives, burned when our dowry money wasn’t enough or when men tired of us, starved as widows when our husbands died (if we survived his funeral pyre), sold for sex because we are not valued for anything else? Would we be sold into marriage to priests to atone for our family’s sins or to improve our



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family's earthly prospects? Would we, when allowed to work for pay, be made to work at the most menial jobs and exploited at barely starvation level? Would our genitals be sliced out to "cleanse" us (our body parts are dirt?), to control us, to mark us and define our cultures? Would we be trafficked as things for sexual use and entertainment worldwide in whatever form current technology makes possible? Would we be kept from learning to read and write?

If women were human, would we have so little voice in public deliberations and in government in the countries where we live? Would we be hidden behind veils and imprisoned in houses and stoned and shot for refusing? Would we be beaten nearly to death, and to death, by men with whom we are close? Would we be sexually molested in our families? Would we be raped in genocide to terrorize and eject and destroy our ethnic communities, and raped again in that undeclared war that goes on every day in every country in the world in what is called peacetime? If women were human, would our violation be enjoyed by our violators? And, if we were human, when these things happened, would virtually nothing be done about it?¹

Violence against women and girls around the world is a problem of pandemic proportions. It takes many forms – physical, sexual, psychological and economic – and it is not confined to a specific culture, region or country; nor is it confined to particular groups of women within a society.²



“Violence against women” means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.³

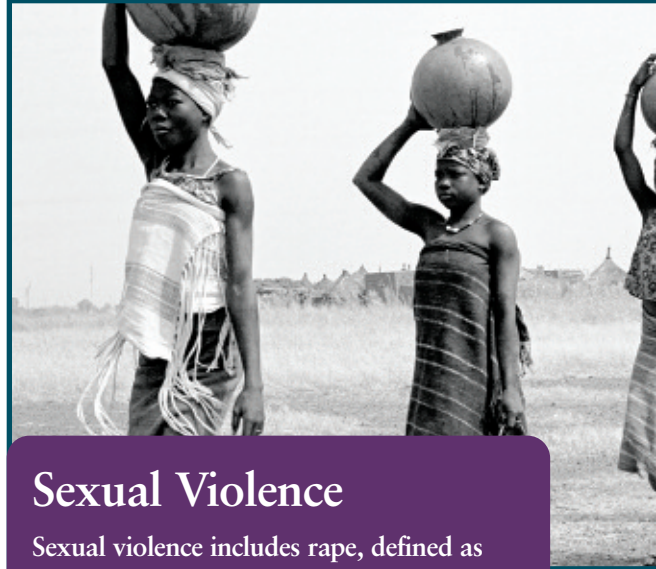
Violence Against Women and Girls

Did you know that:

- Violence against women is one of the most pervasive human rights violations we know today?
- Women aged 15-44 are more at risk from rape and domestic violence than from cancer, car accidents, war and malaria, according to World Bank data?
- Women and girls comprise 80 per cent of the estimated 800,000 people trafficked annually, with the majority (79 per cent) trafficked for sexual exploitation?
- Female infanticide, pre-natal sex selection and systematic neglect of girls are widespread in South and East Asia, North Africa and the Middle East?
- Rape, battery and sexual slavery have become increasingly used as weapons of war?⁴



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Sexual Violence

Sexual violence includes rape, defined as physically forced or otherwise coerced penetration... of the vulva or anus, using a penis or other body parts or an object. Sexual violence can include other forms of assault involving a sexual organ, including coerced contact between the mouth and penis, vulva or anus.⁵

Sexual violence is a war crime, a crime against humanity and a form of genocide. This form of atrocity is intensifying in brutality and frequency. There is growing evidence that while the worst of this sexual violence is deliberately perpetrated by military actors (including state agents), in some contexts it is becoming socially normalized, taken up as a regular practice by ordinary citizens. The legacy of impunity for wartime rape is peacetime rape.



According to Margot Wallström, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, “[T]oday, as throughout history, wartime sexual violence is never adequately recognized, reported or remedied. Rape persists in contexts of conflict and unrest across the globe, because without the credible threat of consequences, there is no deterrent.”⁶

Did you know that:

- Women’s bodies have become part of the terrain of war and genocide?
- During Bangladesh’s nine-month war for independence in 1971, almost 400,000 women and girls were raped, leading to an estimated 25,000 pregnancies?
- During the conflict in Bosnia in the early 1990s, between 20,000 and 50,000 women were raped?
- Between 250,000 and 500,000 women were raped during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda?
- Rape, sexual slavery and sexual violence were used by the Indonesian military as part of their campaign to terrorize pro-independence supporters in East Timor?
- Sexual violence was a feature characterizing the 14-year-long civil war in Liberia?
- The rape and sexual violation of women and girls is pervasive in the conflict in the Darfur region of Sudan?⁷
- “A dead rat is worth more than the body of a woman” in the Democratic Republic of Congo?⁸



Violence Against Women and Girls



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Congo

Bora was asleep in her family home when the three soldiers came. They pushed past her parents and dragged the 19-year-old schoolgirl out of bed at gunpoint.

She was marched uphill to a disused building outside the village where, with two other girls, she was raped and beaten, then sent home. Bora remembers the soldiers chatting and joking by the doorway as they watched the wailing girls stumble back to the village.

Antoinette, 39 and a mother of three, was raped on the same day. She had risen at dawn to pick beans when she was approached by a soldier who beat her around the face with the butt of his rifle before pulling off her clothes and raping her in the field. The attack lasted an hour.

Zainabo, 33, pregnant and already a mother of six, was raped as she walked home from the fields with three of her children and a heavy basket on her head.

The soldier ordered her to set down the basket, leave the children on the road and go into the bush. There he raped her at gunpoint to the sound of her youngsters sobbing by the roadside.⁹

Sexual violence against women is rooted in a global culture of discrimination, which denies women equal rights with men, and legitimizes and sexualizes the violent appropriation of women's bodies for individual gratification or for political ends – despite the principles, ideals and rhetoric of international human rights norms enshrined in documents such as,

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)
- Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children in Emergency and Armed Conflict (1974)
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979)
- Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1984)
- Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (1993)
- Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (2000)
- And other Conventions, Declarations and Resolutions against gender-based violence against women and girls which recognize rape and sexual violence by combatants in the conduct of armed conflict as war crimes, crimes against humanity, or genocide.



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Violence Against Women and Girls

Bosnia

Two of them raped me. Then more Chetniks came, and they wanted to rape me too. I didn't want to do it. They said they were going to throw my baby out the window.

I screamed and cried, and then they left me alone... It was no normal rape. When it was over the blood kept flowing out of me. The other women in the apartment were raped some more by other men.

Another woman tells how the men put a pistol to her head and made her take off all her clothes.

They put their fingers into me all over to see if I was hiding money anywhere. Then four of them raped me, one after the other. They told us we were going to give birth to Serbian children and they would do everything they could so we wouldn't even dare think of coming back again. After the fourth guy I fainted. If I hadn't fainted, they'd have kept on going.

[My] four-year-old daughter had been with the other children in the adjacent room, and the children were able to watch what was happening to their mothers.¹⁰



If the United Nations and other international bodies approve various Declarations and documents about women and pledge to implement the principles contained in them, why is it that women are still targeted for violence?

Because sexual violence does not exist in isolation. Social and cultural norms that deny women equal rights with men render women more vulnerable to sexual abuse. It is compounded by discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, sexual identity, social status, religion, class, caste and age, all of which place women at an increased risk of violence. A global culture of discrimination against women allows sexual violence to occur daily and with impunity.¹¹

While both men and women can be subjected to sexual violence, it is women and girls who are predominantly affected by rape, forced prostitution and sexual slavery. Forced impregnation, forced maternity and forced termination of pregnancy are specific violations that uniquely affect women and girls.

Kidnapped and Raped

Mwanvua has just told a lie and everyone in the room knows it. She stares at her feet, silent.

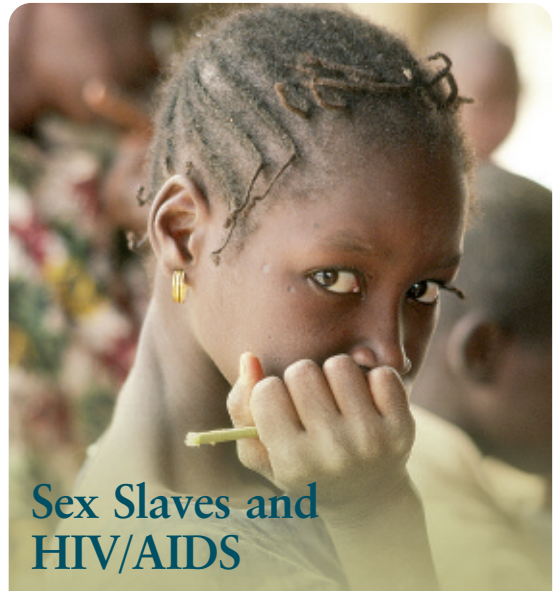
The 14-year-old is back home after months as the prisoner of vagabond soldiers, relating her ordeal. It is the obvious question, and her family ask it: how many of her 13 kidnappers raped her? In little more than a whisper, Mwanvua replies, "One." Her parents and siblings exchange looks but say nothing. Nobody believes her. Not taking her eyes off the earth floor, Mwanvua speaks again after some minutes, the voice firmer this time.

"All of them.

They all passed through me."¹²

Violence Against Women and Girls

Sexual violence breaks every social convention relating to sexuality. It generally exposes the victims to stigmatization, often to discrimination, and it may jeopardize their position in society. In many societies, victims of sexual violence are blamed for their fate. In some societies, victims of sexual violence are shunned, stripped of their rights (whether legal or traditional), and deprived of access to goods and services. They are prevented from speaking out, rejected by their spouses, prevented from marrying, forbidden to take part in certain activities (such as preparing and serving food, growing and harvesting crops, or nursing children), and excluded from school and work. Wherever they go and whatever they do, victims of sexual violence are made to feel ashamed and are ostracized, whether by their families and communities, schools, employers, places of worship, legal institutions or medical facilities. In some cases, whether in war or peace, they are 'buried alive' by society.¹³



Sex Slaves and HIV/AIDS

In societies where ethnicity is inherited through the male line, “enemy” women are raped and forced to bear children. Women who are already pregnant are forced to miscarry through violent attacks. Women are kidnapped and used as sex slaves to service troops, as well as to cook for them and carry their loads from camp to camp. They are purposely infected with HIV/AIDS, a slow painful murder... No woman is exempt from violence and exploitation. During conflict women and girls are attacked because they are related to political adversaries, because they are political leaders themselves, or simply because they were at home when soldiers arrived.¹⁴

Why are women and girls targeted for sexual violence?

- Because women's subordinate and unequal status in peacetime renders them predictably at risk for sexual violence in times of war.
- Because, in part, of the state's failure to take seriously, prevent and prosecute routine and widespread discrimination and violence against women during times of "peace."
- Because, in far too many countries, the honour of a community or family is still closely tied to control of the sexual activity of women and girls. Male family members often put a premium on female virginity, "purity," or sexual inexperience.
- Because an impetus to sexual violence (whether in peace or wartime) is sexual subordination and deriving sexual gratification from sexually harming another.
- Because in too many countries around the world there is widespread impunity for perpetrators of sexual violence against women.

Sometimes those who are sent to prevent violence become the perpetrators of violence against a local population. There have been reports containing allegations of rape and sexual harassment by peacekeepers, as well as alleged complicity in sexual abuse perpetrated by parties to the conflict.¹⁵



Refugee Camp in Chad

They beat us and told us that you blacks are not going to stay here, we will finish you all. Then they grabbed my half-sister, who was only ten years old... I saw two of them lie with my half-sister and then they went away. When we got there she was very hurt and was bleeding. She continued to bleed for the following two days and then died.¹⁶

Violence Against Women and Girls



Peacekeeping and peace-enforcement personnel, like other arms bearers and humanitarian workers, must receive instruction and training in international humanitarian law and human rights law, with specific reference to the protection of women and children, and they must comply with these laws.

Margot Wallström, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, writes that,

Long after the guns fall silent, the consequences of rape remain. For women and girls who walk to marketplaces, water-points or schools on roads still controlled by armed groups, and return home to communities teeming with ex-combatants, the war is not over. Sexual violence has been called a “war within a war”, but often it continues as a “war within the peace”. War lives on in the children born of rape and orphaned by violence, who line the roads in gangs, begging for money and food, aspiring to be soldiers. By attacking shared values, sexual violence destroys not only people, but their sense of being a people. We cannot bring justice to every victim throughout the history of war. But what we are here to do today, and from this moment on, is to ensure that conflict-related sexual violence no longer goes unreported, unaddressed or unpunished.¹⁷



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What can we do now, today, in our time and in our world, to stem the tide of sexual violence against women and girls? How can we answer with a resounding YES! to the question, “Are women human?”

We can:

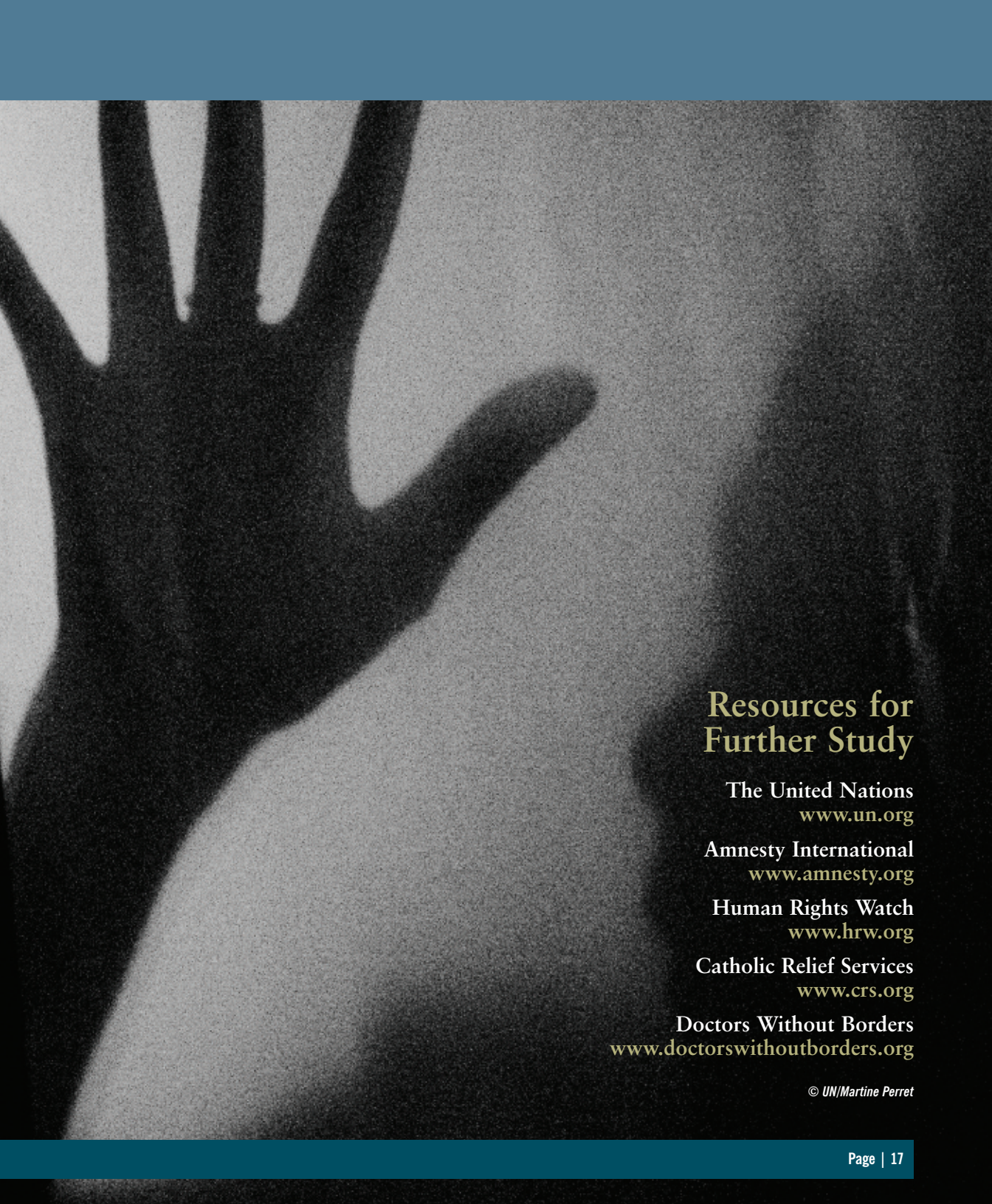
- Study and learn about the various UN Declarations, Conventions and Resolutions concerned with the human rights of women and girls;
- Encourage such study and learning in our schools, colleges and universities, as well as in religious and civil society groups and organizations;
- Join and/or support an organization that advocates for an effective and comprehensive response to violence against women and girls;

Violence Against Women and Girls

We can also:

- Support governments and other actors in their efforts to prevent and eliminate violence against women and girls;
- Establish, fund and coordinate services to make health, legal and social services available to women and girls subjected to sexual and gender-based violence, including transport to medical facilities;
- Find ways to support and strengthen non-governmental and grass-roots organizations' capacities to monitor and seek redress for cases of sexual and gender-based violence;
- Encourage and make possible the involvement of women and girls in devising protection and security strategies in high-risk areas around the world;
- Support educational, health-care and sustainable development services for women and girls who have survived gender-based and sexual violence;
- Educate men and boys in such a way that they will increasingly respect the bodily integrity of women and girls, accept and promote the human rights of women and girls, and partner with women and girls to help make our world a more humane place for everyone.





Resources for Further Study

The United Nations
www.un.org

Amnesty International
www.amnesty.org

Human Rights Watch
www.hrw.org

Catholic Relief Services
www.crs.org

Doctors Without Borders
www.doctorswithoutborders.org

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Violence Against Women and Girls

Notes

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2. UNITE, United Nations Secretary-General's Campaign to End Violence Against Women (UN-DPI 2546A, November 2009).
3. 1993 UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women.
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5. Rachel Jewkes, Purna Sen and Claudia Garcia-Moreno, "Sexual Violence." In Etienne Krug et. al., eds, *World Report on Violence and Health*, (World Health Organization: Geneva, 2002), pp. 149-181.
6. "Women, Peace and Security: Sexual Violence in Situations of Armed Conflict," Statement by Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Margot Wallström, New York, 16 December 2010, at the Open Meeting of the UN Security Council.
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8. As told to the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Margot Wallström, during her September 2010 visit to the Democratic Republic of Congo.
9. *The Times*, London, Charity Appeal, "Congo, a dangerous place to be a woman," 22 January 2011.
10. Alexandra Stiglmayer, ed., *Mass Rape: The War Against Women in Bosnia-Herzegovina* (Lincoln, NB: The University of Nebraska Press, 1994), pp. 108-109.
11. See further, op.cit., "Women, Peace and Security: Sexual Violence in Situations of Armed Conflict."
12. Cherie Booth, "The Spoils of War," *The Guardian*, Friday 3 March 2006.
13. Evelyne Josse, "'They came with two guns': The consequences of sexual violence for the mental health of women in armed conflicts," *The International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol 92 #877, March 2010.
14. Elisabeth Rehn and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, *Women War Peace* (New York: UNIFEM, 2002), pp. 12-13.
15. See further, Rehn & Sirleaf, *Women War Peace*.
16. Testimony of a displaced woman in a Chad refugee camp describing an attack by uniformed men near Goz Beida in Chad to Amnesty International, November 2006.
17. Op.cit., "Women, Peace and Security: Sexual Violence in Situations of Armed Conflict" Statement by UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Margot Wallström.



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Acknowledgements

While it is nearly impossible to thank all the people who have encouraged and enabled us to produce this publication, we would like to try. First and foremost, we want to thank Mary Reynolds RSM and Mercy International Association for encouraging the work of Mercy Global Concern at the United Nations. We also want to acknowledge and thank UN Under-Secretary General Noeleen Heyzer who, as a member of the MGC Advisory Board, encouraged us to take on the challenge of speaking out about sexual violence against women and girls around the world.

Patricia Hartigan RSM and the Santulli Foundation have supported MGC over the years, as has Mercy Associate Ellen Vopicka. We are very grateful to them for their friendship and support. We thank Don Mullan for sharing his many contacts with us, Dr. Wendy Whitworth for her help and Glen Powell, our graphic designer, for bringing our text to life. We are grateful to the UN for their kind permission to use photographs. We also thank the Sisters of Mercy, Mercy Associates, our ministry colleagues, and Mercy students around the world who will use this booklet to make a difference for good in our hurting world.

Finally, we want to dedicate this booklet to Sister Mary Roch Rocklage, a Sister of Mercy and a woman of vision from St. Louis, MO in the USA, for her assistance and encouragement in so many ways.

Deirdre Mullan RSM is the Director of Mercy Global Concern (MGC) at the United Nations in New York.

Carol Rittner RSM is Distinguished Professor of Holocaust & Genocide Studies at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey (USA).



Mercy Global Concern (MGC) at the United Nations in New York is the mechanism by which all those associated with the Sisters of Mercy may interact with the UN system. Through MGC at the UN, Sisters of Mercy and their associates and friends can advocate for the less privileged and make explicit preferential options within a huge network of international bodies.

MERCY GLOBAL CONCERN



777 UN Plaza - 6H
NY 10017, USA
Tel: 1 646 227 1878
Email: mercyun@aol.com
www.mercyworld.org

March 2011