

The feminine body as war booty

In the midst of this confrontation, women's bodies are used as a battleground. They are marked off as a means for delimiting territories. This practice is common to all those who are taking part in the conflict. They use women to gain military objectives.

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Violence has effects on all members of a society, especially on kids and adolescents, who require special attention.

Armed actors use women's bodies as a booty of war for various reasons: to terrorize communities, to impose military control, to force people to flee from their homes so that they can take over their land, to wreak vengeance on their enemies, to accumulate "war trophies" and to exploit women as their sexual slaves.

Sexual violence is usually presented as a way to humiliate the enemy. It implies demonstrating prowess in the face of opponents and letting them see that they have been incapable of protecting their women. The message is that the enemy has been castrated and mutilated.

This is pointed out in the 1998 Special Report on Violence against Women, Radhika Coomaraswamy, where it is also stated that sexual violence is used as a form of punishment for women who supposedly

have had some kind of emotional relationship with members of the opposite band, or it is presumed that they are collaborating with "the enemy." Thus it is used as a way of letting other women in the community know what will happen to them.

This report also states that rape is used as a symbolic act to demoralize the opponent. Women are raped so as to exacerbate the enemy's feelings. It is also common practice that women are forced to become pregnant to further humiliate both the victim herself and her community, obliging her to conceive a child of the enemy.

Violence against women is understood as "any act of violence based on the fact of belonging to the feminine sex which results (or may result) in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering for the woman, as well as threats of performing such acts, or coercion or arbitrary privation of freedom, whether in public or in private life." This defini-

tion is taken from the United Nations declaration on the elimination of violence against women.

Paola Figueroa of the Table on Women and Armed Conflict states that, in the context of the armed conflict, this kind of violence is used to degrade the opposite band by using women's bodies, as well as humiliating and terrorizing the community. The Table is a space for coordinating and reflecting on the different forms of violence committed against women and girls in the context of armed conflict and is constituted by different organizations around Colombia who are working on this subject.

The Fourth Report of this organization deals with sociopolitical violence against women, and states the following: "In this conflict, sexual violence is a practice carried on by the armed actors who use it as a veritable weapon for terrorizing people and is a serious violation of human rights and international humanitarian law."

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In the armed conflict, the discrimination against women is exacerbated, as are all kinds of crimes against women. This is the opinion of Patricia Buriticá from the initiative entitled *Mujeres por la Paz* (Women for Peace), an alliance made up of 22 organizations of women, 246 regional processes and 8 sectors: Indians, peasants, unionists, young people, academics, feminists, peace promoters and leaders in culture and in Afro-Colombian movements.

"Crimes committed against women in the armed conflict cannot be separated from other crimes that are considered to be more serious. Compared with a homicide or a massacre, people tend to think of the violation of women as a relatively minor matter," says Buriticá. As a reaction against the woman's body being used as a war booty, the slogan is to think of the woman's body as a territory for peace.

It is equally true to say that nobody looks at goods that have been lost, thinking of them as a minor problem, but in fact elements such

as vegetable gardens or domestic animals are fundamental for the subsistence of women and their families.

Intimidation and punishment

Sexual violation is also used as a form of intimidation, punishment, reprisal or pressure to obtain information, and for reprimanding men who are not working for a particular illegal armed group. It is a way of punishing the men with whom the women have (or have had) an emotional involvement, or to whom they are in some way related.

Thus sexual violence implies exerting power over women, even though in reality it means exerting power over their men. It's a way of reminding the men that their women are part of the booty of war.

According to the most recent report of the international NGO Project Consultants, the fact that culturally men are not considered to be women's property means that rapes operate the other way round; that is to say, sexual violence is not done to men as a way of punishing women. Therefore sexual violence is designed to break men emotionally and place in jeopardy the model of masculine hegemony in the community where they live.

Thus, although men and women are victims of acts of sexual violence, only women are exposed to sexual enslavement, to abortions and to forced contraception, to unwanted pregnancies and unions under duress. Also, in cases of infidelity, only the women are punished for breaking a code imposed on the community by the armed groups.

In the context of the conflict, rape is thought to be of only minor importance "because the women were not tortured as the men were, but were only raped out of revenge and let live," says the study *Impunity* by Project Consultants.

For Clara Elena Cardona from the House of Women, an NGO working for women's rights, sexual violence is founded on a patriarchal culture conditioned to keep men in power and women subjected to them. In the armed conflict this discrimination becomes even more marked. Through women's bodies, retaliation and vengeance is wrought on the enemy. Women's bodies are part of the spoils of war.

Such sexual violence, says the Report on the Colombia Mission by

the United Nations Special Relater on Violence Against Women, is a breach of International Humanitarian Law.

The Statute of Rome, for its part, stipulates that rape, sexual enslavement, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced sterilization and other similar abuses are considered crimes against humanity when they are carried out as generalized and systematic attacks on the civilian population. Likewise, they can be considered as war crimes when they occur

Women are often raped in front of their children and husbands.



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in the context of an international or internal conflict.

In November 2004, Colombia made use of the disposition of transition in article 124 of the Statute when it declared that for seven years it would not admit the above-mentioned competence of the statute for war crimes committed within the national territory.

Forms of sexual violence

There are various forms of sexual violence. One is harassment to spark off violence. Armed actors harass women making them attend to their domestic needs and offer their sexual favors. Another more direct form is rape itself, as was attested in the Amnesty International investigation entitled *Colombia: bodies marked, crimes silenced: sexual violence against women in the context of the armed conflict*. In this conflict, women and girls are raped with instruments such as rifles or revolvers. "Women and girls are the hidden victims," the study says.

According to the House of Women, a practice that occurs frequently in this conflict is that of taking off women for a few days to act as prostitutes and then returning them to their communities. Forced prostitution is one form of treating people as marketable objects, which is a crime under both national and international law.

The Table on Women and Armed Conflict has shown that women are normally subjected to rape in public, often in the presence of their children and husbands, which causes great distress in the community and leads families to become displaced persons because they fear that their children will also be subjected to these abuses by members of the armed groups.

The Amnesty International study also states that women combatants are submitted to forced contraception, having devices inserted by unqualified persons, and also to abortion against their will. They are also victims of sexual enslavement, being forced to have sexual relations with men of one side or other in the confrontation.

An additional form of sexual violence is that performed by armed actors against women who are leaders of organizations. The idea is to strike at the organizations themselves and destroy them.

In normal situations, women are thought of as those who preserve the social tissue. When they are displaced by violence or from fear of being raped, these tissues break down and therefore social movements also fall apart, often movements which they have built up over years.

Some consequences of this sexual violence are fear and shame. Fear of been attacked, a situation that obliges women to avoid spaces which hitherto they had always shared with their community. And shame for what has happened to them, and because of society's attitude. A woman who has been sexually abused, says Buriticá, is often rejected by her



Studies have revealed cases of violence against women who are part of illegal armed groups.

own family and by the social group she belongs to. She bears a mark which is very hard to wipe out.

Impunity

One of the main problems with regard to these sexual abuses is impunity, a situation which is bred out of fear. As a result, nobody denounces what has happened. In many cases there is also a lack of awareness of the fact that these forms of sexual violence are criminal offences and should be denounced as such.

In the context of the armed conflict, sexual violence remains hidden behind other offenses that are considered to be more important, such as homicide or displacement. Thus, in statistics, these latter offenses are recorded, but not sexual abuse, which has often occurred before the others.

There are no reliable statistics on sexual abuse due to the armed conflict. Those that do exist reflect the situation in other contexts. And even so, they remain under-recorded for the same reason: namely, the fear of denouncing them.

The National Institute for Legal Medicine and Forensic Science is the body which passes verdicts on sexual matters and enables us to determine whether or not a person has been victim of an offence against his or her freedom or sexual modesty. During 2005, 18,474 verdicts were passed, of which 13,697 corresponded to women. Among them, those most affected were girls of between ten and fourteen years of age, who received 4,817 verdicts.

Paradoxically, despite the situations which women have to face, the armed conflict has obliged many women to get organized in order to resist, to rebuild the social tissue and to fight for their rights. Others, meanwhile, continue to be silent victims of sexual violence: "a combat between men which is being fought on the battleground of women's bodies." ■