

EVENT REPORT
BÖLL LUNCH DEBATE 30 JUNE 2011

Sexual, Gender Based Violence in Armed Conflicts 3 Years After UN Security Council Resolution 1820: What Can Be Done to Strengthen Women's Political Participation?¹

The first week of July's European Parliament plenary session debate on cases of breaches of human rights, democracy and the rule of law (under rule 122) looked, amongst others, at mass rapes that recently took place in the South Kivu province in the Democratic Republic of Congo. This is one out of many horrific incidents which show that, even though armed conflicts mean great tragedy and suffering for everyone involved, women and girls are, however, often affected in a particularly cruel way.

Sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) is a serious obstacle to many ongoing peace processes in the world and urgently needs to be addressed according to the recommendations set out by the UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820.

During the lunch debate, Diba Hareer from *medica Afghanistan*, Marlys Cheeseman, Head of the *Sembabule Women's Developmental Agency (SEWODA)* in Liberia and Beatrice Yalala Laziri, from *Promotion et Appui aux Initiatives Féminines (PAIF)* in the DR Kongo presented the specific problems and demands concerning SGBV in their countries which find themselves at different stages of ongoing or post-armed-conflict.² Victoria Correa,

policy officer on gender equality at the European Commission, added her view on the EU's work and challenges in this field.

The following key ideas, concerns, demands and proposals were expressed during the speaker's presentations and during the subsequent discussion:



Picture ©Daniela Pastoors / *medica mondiale*

Various forms of SGBV occur during and after armed

conflicts, committed by different groups of perpetrators, causing diverse problematic consequences and therefore need to be addressed accordingly with differing preventive and remedial measures:

¹ Event was held under Chatham House Rule.

² These speakers belong to a delegation of women's rights activists who are part of a 3 years project organised by ISIS Europe, *medica mondiale* and *Promotion et Appui aux Initiatives Féminines (PAIF)* funded by the European Commission on "Political Participation of Women and Girls in Afghanistan, Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo in Peace and Security Policy.

Firstly, ‘public violence’ is mostly occurring during war-times and is perpetrated by warlords or people who hold weapons, which they might even have received from the government. Rape and sexual violence is often also committed against their own civilian population. Secondly, ‘domestic violence’, the rape of women by her husband is often ‘miss-interpreted’ or ‘miss-judged’ as it is often seen as a ‘sign of love’. A clear distinction between voluntary and forced sexual interaction must be promoted and the existence of rape in marriage needs to be acknowledged and seen as a severe form of violence. The ‘miss-interpretation’ of this act of violence is, inter alia, due to a lack of education, which can, for example, be seen in the high illiteracy rate (see below). Domestic violence is most of the times not investigated. The reasons vary but the most frequently given explanation is that authorities do not want to interfere in family matters.

The socio-economic context in the countries where armed conflicts are taking place is in many ways enhancing the extent of these problems:

First, the **lack of education** of both, perpetrators and victims is at the heart of the problem as it tends to complicate preventive measures, it decreases the acceptance of campaigns on the issue and it prevents women from reporting the crime because they do not know that they have a right to do so. Therefore, awareness raising and trainings should be given a priority in the fight against SGBV.

Secondly, a **poor economic background** amplifies the severity of consequences for victims in the sense that women who are outcast by their husband because they are unable to perform the sexual act after being raped, often do not have any means to secure, neither their own living, nor the life of their children (food, education). Furthermore, the lack of financial resources contributes to a stagnation or even aggravation of the problem as remedial measures (e.g.: necessary awareness rising projects, police trainings, reforms of the judicial system etc.) or even first aid measures can not be taken. Also the lack of necessary infrastructure (roads, functioning mail system), which goes along with bad economic conditions, represents an obstacle to the fight against SGBV: complaint files often do not make their way to a court and if they do, there is still a high chance that they are ‘lost’ or ignored within the administrative structures of the court.

In the Liberian case, where the conflict is regarded as ‘being over’, funds are even more difficult to access although severe consequences of SGBV continue to exist: The Liberian government, even if very committed to the fight against SGBV, needs international support (both financial + expertise) in order to improve the situation.

In general, **rural areas** tend to be more severely affected by SGBV than cities as the above mentioned enhancing effects of lack of education and missing infrastructure are more widely spread outside big agglomerations. In rural areas, the access to justice for victims is, in a very practical sense, extremely limited: before a victim reaches (often by foot) a police station (which, depending on the area, can take several days) to report the rape, all evidence can be destroyed.

It becomes clear, that survivors of SGBV are in need of **different types of support** which are unfortunately most of the time not at all or only very limitedly provided:

Firstly, the most evident support needed is of course of **financial and political nature**, as funds must be available and political dialogue must take place in order to ensure the realisation of projects which aim at overcoming the above mentioned socio-economic problems and to ensure remedial measures. The reintegration of outcast women into society is also part of social and economic needs.

Secondly, **medical care** must be provided to the victims who are often given Aspirin although they suffer from severe wounds in the genital area, which need a more sophisticated treatment. Therefore, funds have to be allocated more precisely in order to provide specific medical care for victims of SGBV.

Thirdly, apart from physical wounds most of the victims are traumatised by the extreme violent acts they had to go through. Even if help is provided on the ground, the personnel often lack experience or knowledge in how to treat traumatised people. In order to guarantee adequate treatment and **psychological care** for traumatised women, psychological training and education of the support organisations' staff is urgently needed.

In addition to these necessary immediate measures and support, it becomes clear that a long term approach is needed in order to overcome the problem in a more sustainable way. But the **peace building process** in post armed conflict countries involves further difficulties:

Often, perpetrators of SGBV crimes are not brought to justice and become part of the peace building structures or the high authorities responsible for the reconstruction of their country in the aftermath of an armed conflict. Some claim, for example, that members of the Afghan High Peace Council who is responsible for the peace negotiations with the Taliban, have been involved in SGBV related war crimes. Consequently victims do not trust the high authorities in place to be able to take care of their demands and to ensure the eradication of the phenomenon of SGBV.

Women therefore urgently need to be involved in **post-conflict decision making** in order to include and respect women's demands and to ensure that decisions that are taken by the temporary authorities will not further harm women. **Women's participation** in the peace building process certainly is the only way to **sustainable peace** and to a long term amelioration of the situation. At the same time, the integration of women in committees in charge will increase the credibility of and the acceptance for these authorities in place.

Others claim that sustainable peace can only be reached through justice and that the perpetrators of SGBV related war crimes have to be brought to court. Even though obviously nobody disagrees with that, critical voices give the warning example of several arrest warrants issued by the ICC which in the past have had counterproductive effects on peace building processes in the world.

While the high importance of the integration of women in the peace building process is undisputable, it is equally important to **include men** in the dialogue and in the fight against SGBV. Only by ‘acting in concert’ it is possible to avoid a mono-dimensional approach which would exclude men from the work that needs to be done and decrease their acceptance for the changes that have to take place.

For more information on the EU funded 3 years project organised by *ISIS Europe, medica mondiale* and *Promotion et Appui aux Initiatives Feminines (PAIF)* on "Political Participation of Women and Girls in Afghanistan, Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo in Peace and Security Policy" as well as on their meeting with the European Parliament's Subcommittee on Human Rights 30 June 2011, please see:

http://www.isis-europe.org/pdf/2011_artrel_643_epupdate-droi-30jun11.pdf

and

<http://www.medicamondiale.org/themen/friedensarbeit/?L=1>.